

BETWEEN TWO OPINIONS

MARY E. PALGRAVE



3 1761 06216699 6





Presented to the
LIBRARIES of the
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

by

Hugh Anson-Cartwright

Barrel No. 16 Spurlock

S. Toronto May. 1863







See page 58.

BETWEEN
❁ ❁ TWO ❁ ❁
OPINIONS

BY MARY E. PALGRAVE

AUTHOR OF 'DRIFTWOOD' 'HOW
DICK FOUND HIS SEA-LEGS' ETC



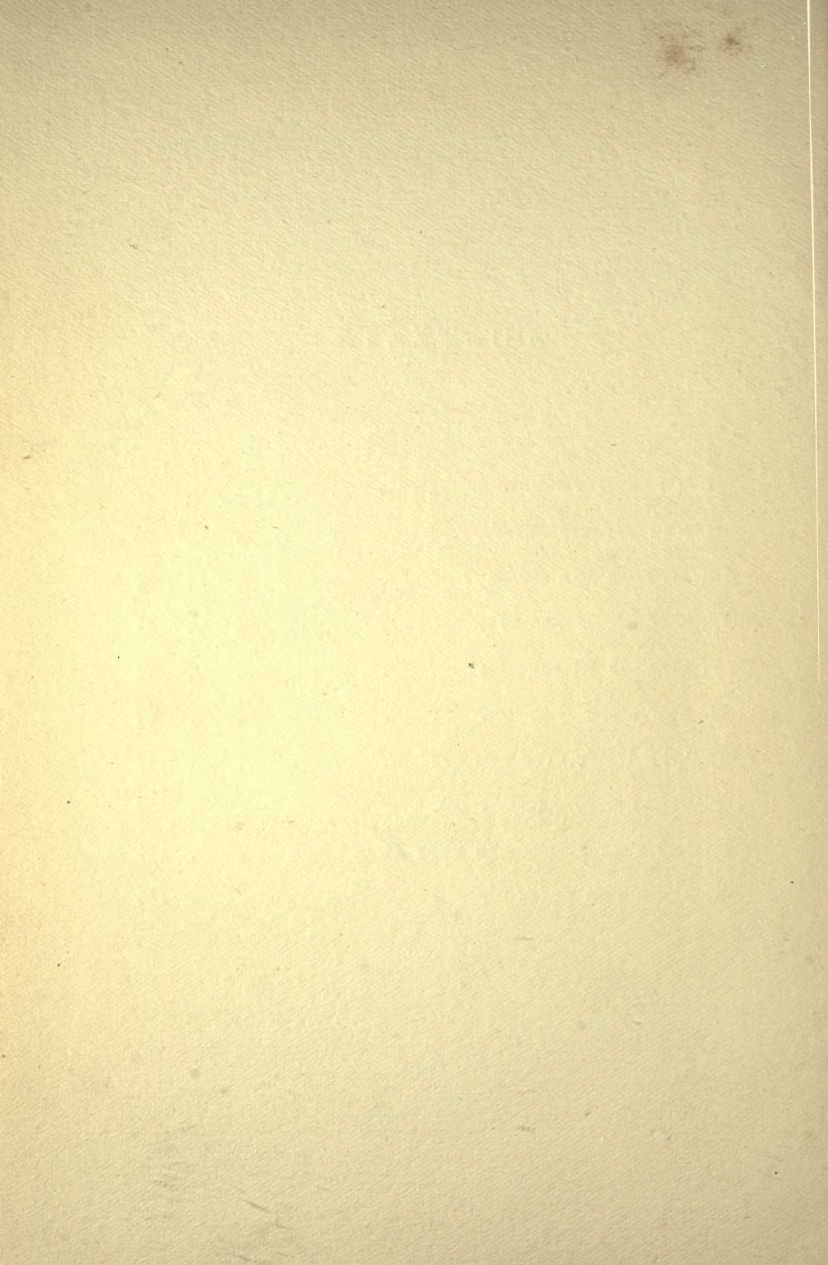
LONDON THE RELIGIOUS
TRACT SOCIETY 56 PATER-
NOSTER ROW AND 65 ST. PAUL'S
❁ ❁ CHURCHYARD ❁ ❁



CONTENTS



CHAP.	PAGE
I. A DAMP INTRODUCTION	3
II. NEW RELATIONSHIPS	25
III. BROTHER AND SISTER.	37
IV. A COMMON-SENSE VIEW	61
V. ELEANOR WILSON	75
VI. NEW LIGHT	92
VII. 'YOU WON'T GIVE HIM UP?'.	116
VIII. OPPOSING COUNSELS	139
IX. 'HE THAT FIGHTS AND RUNS AWAY'	159
X. AFTER TWO YEARS	174



BETWEEN TWO OPINIONS



CHAPTER I

A DAMP INTRODUCTION



ORLESTON is one of those places which has recently had the misfortune to be discovered, by the world of holiday-seekers, as a seaside resort. Formerly it was just a fishing village at the mouth of the 'Yarmouth river,' with a big flint church set on the sandy hill, and a straggling street of red-brick cottages, with here and there a more pretentious house among them, running down from the higher land to the sea. The charm of the place, over and above the perpetual charm of the salty, vigorous, pungent air, lies in its royal expanse of sands—sands stretching away southwards in a broad yellow band, made new every day by the racing in and

out over them of the strong tides of the North Sea—and in its river side, skirting the south bank of the Yare. The wharves there are strewn with boats, festooned with nets, and piled with lobster-pots, cork floats, and all the other delicious tarry lumber that pertaineth to a sea-going people; and the rippled breast of the river is continually alive with the passing up and down of steamers, fishing boats, small yachts, and other craft.

Gorleston Pier is one of the best places in England for breathing in the smell and taste of the sea. It is no hideous, spider-legged, spick-and-span erection at which you pay a penny to go on, and twopence when the band is going to play. It is, rather, a growth of generations, and looks as fitting and spontaneous a termination to the spit of sandy shore from which it springs as if Nature had fashioned it herself. We pass from the gravelly, grassy, net-strewn area of the wharves to the weather-beaten soppy planks of the pier, almost without noticing the difference, and—picking our steps between lumber of all sorts—make our way to the pier-head, where a miniature lighthouse carries aloft the light which marks the harbour's mouth, and a disused capstan witnesses to the day when vessels used to be dragged in over the bar by the sheer force of brawny arms, to the tune

of tramping feet and long-drawn [cries of 'Yo-ho-o-o-o-o!']

It is a fine thing to stand at the pier-head, as near to the edge as one dare, and watch the meeting of river and sea — especially when the tide is high and when there has been rain over Norfolk and Suffolk, so that a big volume of water is pouring down the Yare, from Breydon Water and its other inland feeders. Then the conflict between the strong yellow river and the mighty green sea, as they meet upon the bar at the harbour's mouth, is something grand and terrible to see. The huge, grey-green billows, with their foaming, fizzling, snowy crests, come rolling majestically in, looking as if they must and would bear all before them; but, in the midst of their progress, they are met by the swaying, chopping, tawny waves of the river, which charge against them, hurling themselves up their imperturbable fronts, till the huge monsters curl over and break, and all is riot and confusion—an inextricable *mêlée*.

Gorleston still has its golden shore untouched, and its wharves and pier are much the same as they were a hundred years ago; but the 'visitor' (we say not the 'tripper'!) has descended upon the place, and for his accommodation a large new quarter of red-brick villas has sprung up on the

fields above the town, and come pouring down the hillside towards the sea. The old fishing village is now like a dry and antique kernel imbedded in a newer shell; and its old-world look, as seen from a distance, has sadly vanished.

A few years ago, at the time of my story, this mushroom growth of houses had only lately begun, and had not spread far over the fields. There were but some half-dozen terraces of small lodging-houses, on the crest of the sandy cliff, in which the 'visitors' of Gorleston were accustomed to locate themselves; and the pier, towards sunset, was as quiet and deserted a place as you could wish to find.

One lovely summer evening the only two people to be seen there were a girl, sitting reading on a pile of logs, and a small boy playing about wherever his fancy led him. The girl evidently found her book absorbing, for it was but rarely she raised her eyes to see what her charge might be doing. When at length she did so, it was to cry, 'Bobby, come down! Do you hear what I say? Well, if you *will* climb up there, I hope you'll— Oh—h—but I didn't mean *that*!' For there was a sudden slip, a wild clutching of arms and legs, and with a yell that had real terror in it, Bobby disappeared over the side of the pier. There was

deep water below him — a surging, tumbling, seething mass of strong green waves of the North Sea, mixing with the yellow waters of the Yare. It was not a nice place for anyone to tumble in; least of all a child eight years old, who could barely swim.

For a perceptible moment the girl was powerless to move from the place where she was sitting. She sank back on the log deadly white and gasping with horror. Then with a mighty effort she scrambled to her feet and ran across the pier to the place where her little brother had disappeared. At intervals, along that side of the pier, there stood massive mooring-posts—mighty logs, each of which had once been the trunk of a whole tree. It was on the top of one of these posts that Bobby Mordaunt had chosen to stand, and whence he had just taken an impromptu header into the river.

His sister Alethea peered over the side, with a face as white as the clouds above her. But the horror lasted only for a moment. Instead of what she had expected to see—Bobby's yellow head drifting in the river's mouth, the plaything of those awful waves—there the child was, in the act of being lifted into a boat by a pair of strong arms which had got a good clutch on the back

of his sailor blouse. He looked very much like a puppy, being hauled up by the scruff of his neck, and he was dripping all over, and pale and terrified; but what was *that* compared to what might have been! Alethea felt the tears rush into her eyes and a sob give a tight grip at her throat.

‘Oh, Bobby, are you safe? Are you really not hurt?’ she called, in a voice that quivered with relief. Bobby’s rescuer looked up with a start. It had been surprising enough, for the moment, to have this sprawling urchin shooting down out of space and plunging into the water within a foot of his boat’s side, and enough of an occupation to fish him out again. He was hardly prepared to have another actor appear so quickly on the scene. He deposited Bobby in the bottom of the boat, looked up, and raised his hat.

‘The youngster has come to no harm,’ he called out, with a grin of amusement; ‘he’s only out of breath and rather scared with his ducking. I’ll soon bring him up to you.’

There was a ladder close by, which the fishermen used to mount from their boats to the pier. Bobby’s rescuer tucked him unceremoniously under one arm and swung himself up the ladder with active steps. He dumped his burden down on

his feet on the pier, and the girl flung her arms round the dripping little figure with a sob.

‘Oh, Bobby, Bobby, you might have been drowned!’ she cried, covering his soaked curls with kisses.

‘Don’t,’ said Bobby, wriggling himself away, with the colour coming back into his face. ‘Lend us your hanky, can’t you, Ally? I—I want to blow my nose.’

‘It was very lucky for him that he didn’t pitch on the boat’s edge,’ remarked the young man. ‘There would have been a different tale to tell had he done *that*. As it was, he couldn’t have managed things better if he had known what was going to happen.’

Alethea Mordaunt straightened herself up, and glanced at the speaker with a blush. In the rush of relief and joy, after her terrible fear, she had totally forgotten his presence, and was seized with sudden shyness at the thought that a stranger had witnessed her demonstrations towards her rescued brother.

‘Oh, it *was* a happy thing that you chanced to be so near!’ she cried, with a catch in her voice. There was a gorgeous sunset flaming in the west, behind the roofs and chimneys and church tower of Gorleston. Some of its brightness was reflected

in the girl's face, warming her soft cheeks and making them glow. She timidly put out her hand. 'Thank you, more than I can say,' she murmured under her breath, with a shy, appealing look, and a half-smile over her own tearfulness.

'Oh, it is not worth speaking of, indeed! I assure you I couldn't have helped catching him,' was the reply; and they shook hands and parted.

Frank Elliston found himself suddenly wishing there had been something further to say or do which might have kept that face under the shady hat in view a little longer. It was so very young and tender and innocent-looking, there was a great charm about it. Elliston was attracted, too, by the girl's gentle voice, and would have liked to hear it again. He bethought himself that he might have given some advice as to the youngster's treatment after his wetting, but it was too late; the girl had already turned away, and was saying, 'Come, Bobby darling, we must run home as quick as ever we can! Let us make haste.'

At that moment, however, Elliston caught the echo of fresh footsteps, tramping up the pier at a great pace, and another voice broke on his ear.

'My good—children, what—on earth have you

been after? What makes—Bobby look like a—drowned rat?’ someone was calling out, in a series of emphatic gasps. It was a voice with a comic sort of boisterous ring in it. Elliston could not resist glancing over his shoulder to discover what its owner might be like. He beheld a short, stout lady, in a crumpled alpaca dress, with a mushroom hat on her head decidedly awry, and a walking-stick in her hand. She was coming up the pier at a sturdy trot, looked puzzled and excited, and was much out of breath. A boat-house, standing just in the way, had prevented her from seeing the brief accident; but it was plain from both Bobby’s and his sister’s looks that something had been happening, even had not the little boy—who was now just recovered enough to know what a fright he had been in—suddenly burst out crying, and flung himself, all tears and salt water, broadcast against his mother.

‘Bobby has had a tumble off that post into the river,’ began Alethea, pointing with her parasol.

‘And who pulled him out again?—not *you*, I should say, by the look of you!’ A pair of lively grey eyes were directed at the girl’s dress, which was as speckless and unbedraggled as a newly washed brown holland could be.

The daughter blushed. 'No, it wasn't I, mother; it was that'— She glanced shyly in the direction of the retreating figure of Bobby's rescuer. He had reached the pier side and was looking after his boat, which lay rocking on the tumbling water below; but his ears were sharp, and he could not help hearing what was being said, and being diverted thereby.

'And you let him go without a word of thanks, you cold-blooded creature?' shrilled out the other voice. 'Bobby, my precious darling, to think what might have happened to you!'

'No, indeed I didn't, mother. I said all I—*could*,' replied the low, soft tones, which again struck pleasantly on Elliston's ear.

'Well—we must suppose you did, then! Still, I must thank him on my own account. Hi! hi, there!'

Elliston faced about, as promptly as if it were the most polite and natural thing in the world to be summoned in such a manner, to behold the stout lady kneeling on the pier, quite regardless of a trail of damp nets in the midst of which she found herself. One arm was round Bobby, who was sobbing on her neck, and with the other she was brandishing the walking-stick, to further emphasise her summons to himself. The girl stood

by, trim and dainty, with a distressed, disapproving look.

The stick was dropped as the young man approached, and a hand was eagerly held out to him. It was innocent of any glove, and as sunburnt as a schoolboy's; but, in spite of this, Elliston felt it was a lady's hand, and the eyes lifted to his face had in them the frank friendliness of an equal.

'My girl tells me that this good-for-nothing shrimp of a boy has been tumbling into the sea, and you have been pulling him out again. I don't know a bit how it happened, and he wasn't the least worth saving—hey, Bobbins?—but as he happens to belong to me I must thank you very heartily. I hope it wasn't done at great risk to yourself?'

'No indeed, not the slightest,' answered Elliston politely. 'I only wish there were anything to thank me for, but I assure you there isn't. This young man took the neatest header off the pier, and it was the easiest thing in the world to fish him out again. The worst part of the business is that he has given his—his sister?—rather a fright, I'm afraid.' Elliston glanced sympathetically in the girl's direction. She was growing paler and paler, and was trembling from

head to foot, while fighting to keep back hysterical tears.

The lady looked up sharply. 'Don't be a goose, Alethea,' she said; 'there's nothing on earth to cry about.' She herself was busy, all the time, dabbling alternately her own eyes and her boy's with her pocket-handkerchief; but it did not seem to occur to her that anyone else had a claim to such relief. Whether permitted or not, however, in another moment Alethea had slid down on a log lying near, and hidden her face in her hands. Elliston stood by, loth to go, yet feeling somewhat at a loss what to do. He had received his meed of thanks, and might have withdrawn himself and gone about his business; but the girl's sweet, appealing looks and lovely eyes had attracted him, and the sense that her mother was rather 'down upon' her had awakened his sympathy. He lingered, therefore, to see whether it might not be possible in some way to act the part of a consoler.

'Would you not like me to fetch you some water, or — or something?' — he inquired anxiously. There was a little public-house at the foot of the pier, towards which he vaguely looked. It might, he imagined, be a case for brandy.

‘No — oh *no*, thank you,’ gasped Alethea, between two mighty sobs.

‘My daughter is addicted to crying for nothing at all! She doesn’t take after her mother in that,’ remarked the lady, with a twinkle, while making a vigorous thrust at her own eyes with a damp ball unwillingly relinquished by her son. She put the child away from her as she spoke, and scrambled, with a sort of roundabout agility, to her feet. ‘Come along home, my man, and mother shall put you to bed and give you some hot negus. Only think how good that will be! You can manage to walk, can’t you, if Ally and I take you one on each side? We shall soon get you home.’

But Bob declared, between his sobs, that he couldn’t walk a step—he felt *so* bad, and his legs wouldn’t move! Mother must get a sailor-man to carry him on his back.

‘I shall do as well as a sailor-man, shan’t I, youngster?’ asked Elliston good-naturedly. ‘Will you allow me to carry him home for you?’ And, without more ado, Bobby was raised again in the vigorous arms which had pulled him out of the Yare, and the little party moved off towards the town.

Alethea pulled herself up and followed dejectedly. She was aware that weeping makes the nose red

and otherwise affects the complexion. She moved along a little in the rear of her mother; for she was at an age when the outer woman plays a large part in the consciousness of the inner; and besides, very few specimens of the genus *young man* had as yet come within her limited horizon, and it was provoking to have been seen acting the cry-baby before such a favourable sample of the race.

Elliston was undoubtedly an attractive personage. Though not tall, he was upright and well made, and had a disciplined, soldierly bearing, and alert, agile movements. He was not handsome, yet he possessed, to a marked extent, that pleasantness of look and manner which is such a good substitute for good looks, and which it is as impossible to define as it is easy to recognise.

It was natural to suppose that this lady and her children were, like himself, chance visitors to Gorleston, and staying in the lodging-house quarter; and on leaving the pier, Elliston, as a matter of course, turned his steps in that direction. But his guide pointed with her walking-stick the other way.

‘No, we don’t dwell among the lodgers,’ she said. ‘We are burgesses of Gorleston, and live in the old part of the town. My house is in the street—the street *par excellence*.’

Elliston followed her guidance, and presently found himself at the door of an old red-brick house, one of the biggest and most dignified-looking that the place could boast of. He remembered having admired it, the day before, on his way from the station, and having thought that it was the sort of house in which you would expect the mayor, or some other local magnate, to dwell. It had a carved wooden porch, and a handsome flight of steps leading up from the pavement.

From within the door shouts and whoopings resounded, mingled with the clatter of footsteps and the slamming of other doors. Evidently there was high revel of some sort going on within.

Elliston set his burden down on the topmost step, and prepared to take his leave; but he was met by an eager, 'Pray come in and have some tea,' from the elder of his companions. He hesitated. The church clock was banging out seven, so it was much too late for tea; moreover, he was not particularly fond of children, and that racket within was by no means inviting, and would be distinctly objectionable at closer quarters. On the whole, he thought he would be off to his lodgings; and he was about to excuse himself and take leave, when again his eyes fell on the face of

the girl who was standing silently by. She had struggled out of her tears, and the pretty rose flush was coming back into her cheeks and the brightness into her hazel eyes. It struck the young man's fancy that he should like to have her look at him and speak to him again, and that it would be pleasant to hear that peculiarly gentle voice, as well as to see what her home might be like on a nearer view. So he cut short the sentence about 'time to be getting back to my diggings' upon which he had started, and followed the two ladies into the house.

It struck him as a trifle odd to be calling upon people whose name he did not even know, and still more odd, perhaps, that they should be inviting him in, under the same circumstances; but that last was *their* lookout, not his! And after all, what did it matter, when he was going away in a day or two, and should never see them again? So, with a half-grin at himself, in he marched.

Two boys, bigger than his acquaintance Bobby, and two—no, three little girls, all flowing hair, long legs, and dirty pinafores, were revealed when the door was opened, in the act of rushing violently downstairs. Bobby, forgetting his late inability to walk, charged after them, yelling with the best;

and the whole crew disappeared into the back regions of the house, in a whirlwind of shouts and clatter which made Elliston feel inclined to stop his ears.

His hostess, quite unmoved, led the way into a sitting-room, which looked only less of a bear-garden than the hall they had just crossed. Sofa cushions and footstools lay heaped together in the middle of the floor; two chairs were on their backs on the sofa; and there were signs of a barricade having been erected across the bow window.

‘Oh,’ cried the girl, with a face of dismay, ‘those abominable children! And they *know* they are forbidden to come in here!’

‘Never mind, my dear; what can you expect on a Saturday afternoon, and with you and me both gadding our several ways, and no one to look after them? I’ve been tramping to Burgh Castle and back—*such* mud!—And I daresay *you* know what children will be like when they get the house to themselves?’ This last was said with the frankest smile at Elliston, as his hostess dismounted a chair from the sofa and planted herself upon it, while inviting him to occupy the place thus vacated. The girl moved about the room, tidying its disorder with deft fingers and a vexed face.

Elliston's eyes followed her as she went, with evident admiration of her slim and youthful grace.

Before the conclusion of his call the young man was in possession of all the facts about his new acquaintances that he needed to know. He had been made aware that his hostess's name was Mordaunt, and that her husband was a colonel in the army, now in India with his regiment; that they were the possessors of seven children, who had to be educated and started in life on about as narrow means as it was possible to do the job; and that, to this end, Mrs. Mordaunt had settled herself at Gorleston, as a cheap and healthy place, within reach of a good Grammar School for the boys. There was also a day-school available, which the little girls might in course of time attend; but at present it appeared that such learning as they received was being imparted to them by their eldest sister—Elliston's acquaintance—whose own education was supposed to have been finished a year ago.

The room, round which the young man's eye roved in pursuit of the girl's flitting form, would in itself have testified that its owners were people not over-blest with ways and means. Its outlook, upon a sloping bit of garden, gay with flowers, and

having for a background the red roofs by the river and the fringe of masts and cordage of the craft lining its banks, was cheerful and pretty enough. But the room itself was comfortless and shabby, and its scanty furniture had an uncared-for look. It bore the aspect of a place in which the inhabitants encamped rather than lived, and gave Frank Elliston — accustomed to his mother's elaborate drawing-room—a sense of vague discomfort.

Mrs. Mordaunt made no secret of her poverty; on the contrary, was inclined to dilate upon the difficulties of making both ends meet with a frankness that her daughter by no means approved of—to judge by the movements of her slender shoulders.

Her listener, who himself had never known anything but comfort and plenty, might have felt inclined to pity the stout lady for the difficulties of her task; but her smile was so jovial and her power of taking things easily so manifest, that he came to the conclusion such sentiments would be thrown away.

It struck him, however, that there might be reason to bestow some pity on the daughter, whose expression was as serious and anxious as if the cares of a kingdom were weighing on her young shoulders. When the room had been

made as straight as might be, she came and sat down near her mother; but she seemed to be momentarily expecting some outbreak or catastrophe of that horde of young savages in the background—whose existence made itself known, from time to time, by distant clamours—and only gave a wistful look and half attention to the brisk talk going on between her companions.

Now, Frank Elliston was accustomed to receiving the entire attention and interest of such young ladies as it pleased his fastidiousness to talk to; and it might be, therefore, that the distractedness and aloofness of this damsel somewhat piqued his vanity, and made him keen to win the full concentration of those beautiful hazel eyes. He exerted himself to talk well and pleasantly, and was rewarded at last, if only for a moment, by so charming a smile and look of pleased interest on the grave young face as made him feel his trouble had been worth the taking. He was more attracted, somehow, by the looks of this serious maiden than he had been by many readier damsels; and he turned his spare thoughts to considering what other topics he could find that would interest her, and win him some more of those rare smiles. The charms of the pier as the place for an evening stroll, and the wonders of the sunsets and moon-

rises to be seen from it, had been a successful magnet for opening those lips and awakening those eyes.

Before leaving the house Elliston had received an invitation to supper on the following evening, and had accepted it with an alacrity which amused himself. He laughed over his own eagerness as he strolled down the High Street in the gathering dusk, and paused, half-way up the hill, to admire the distant lights of Yarmouth sparkling and twinkling across the dusky belt of sandhills to the north of the river. 'How Connie would chaff me!' he said to himself, as he felt in his pocket for his pipe. 'I suppose she'd own to that little girl's being pretty; nobody could deny *that*, with that oval face and that brow and eyes—they *are* lovely eyes, and innocent ones, too! I wonder if she thinks the world a very wicked place!—but she'd call her a wooden doll, and say she hadn't the most elementary notions about behaviour, and so on. Well, anyway, it will be livelier than a solitary feed of cold mutton at Mrs. What's-her-name's; and to-morrow I'm due at the Dysons'; so what does it matter?'

Next day, however, a card was posted at the Gorleston Post Office, addressed to the Constance aforesaid, whereon was written: 'I've given up

the D.'s, and am stopping on here a few days longer, so please forward letters here, if any come for me. Will let you know when I move on. Find this isn't half a bad little hole after all, and there's uncommonly good river fishing.—F. E.'

CHAPTER II

NEW RELATIONSHIPS

FIVE minutes past five! I suppose we must not have tea up till Frank and his young woman appear — tiresome creatures! Can you wait, though, mother? I'm sure I wouldn't, if you are starving!' The speaker was a young lady, and the place a London drawing-room, in the dusk of a November afternoon. She rose, as she spoke, from a writing-table strewn with letters and papers and looking like the centre and starting-point of many occupations, and crossed the room to the fire, beside which a lady was sitting and yawning now and then with a faint, ladylike sound.

'Yes, thank you, my dear; I can manage to wait. It would not look friendly to begin tea without them. But you might light some more candles, or they will be tumbling over the chairs and things when they arrive.'

The lighting of candles disclosed a large, luxurious room, so full of furniture and knick-knacks that Lady Elliston's fears that 'they' might tumble over things were amply justified. The light revealed the three tall windows, from which nothing could be seen but a yellow-grey space of foggy twilight, with a few gaunt boughs and bare twigs of the nearer trees in the square thrusting themselves into view. It revealed, too, Constance Elliston and her mother—the latter an elderly lady whose cap seemed to be the most pronounced thing about her; and the former a short, upright personage of thirty or thereabouts, who was dressed in the trimmest of tailor-made suits, and carried her head with an air of decision and aplomb which—if it did not set your back up—made you instinctively feel inclined to defer to her. Constance had her brother's quick, dark eyes, and the colouring and shape of their faces were very similar. People who were not fond of Miss Elliston said that she was a bad likeness of Frank; and certainly the *bonhomie* which made the charm of his face was entirely lacking in hers. On the other hand, there was a firmness and vigour about Constance's eyes and chin which were to be looked for in vain in her brother; people who admired her said that there was 'so much *force* about her,'

and so there was—a force which only needed to be tempered with sweetness to make her a person of great influence.

She knelt down on the hearthrug when she had lighted the candles, and held a pair of chilly hands to the fire. Her mother eyed her, over a yawn, timidly, and with the air of wanting to say something, but not knowing how to begin. The firelight showed a pucker in Constance's brow, and a compression about her lips which made her look particularly unapproachable.

'My dear,' began Lady Elliston at last, after one or two false starts which had been smothered in her pocket-handkerchief, 'I—I hope—I should be so sorry if—if you didn't feel friendly towards—well, towards Frank and Alethea. Of course it isn't *quite* what we expected of him—to go and fall head over ears in love with a little country girl like this. But at any rate she *is* a lady—her father comes of the Shropshire Mordaunts, you know, a good old family whom my cousin'—

'Oh, *please*, mother,' cried Constance, interrupting her with a shrug of the shoulders, 'for pity's sake don't let us have it all over again! I remember perfectly about the Shropshire Mordaunts, and that they have been passed by Lady Elizabeth—which, of course, leaves nothing more to be said! I'm

prepared to find this girl as ladylike as you please, and to welcome her as—as a sister! I don't expect to like her, or care for her, or find her interesting—that would be more than you could look for from a body under the circumstances. But Frank has chosen to engage himself, and is bringing his young lady here to exhibit to his family; and we are going to receive her with open arms;—and so there's an end of it! What *is* the use of our discussing it again from the beginning?'

'Well, of course we are going to *receive* her, Constance; it would never do to cold-shoulder Frank! He has got the means to be independent, more's the pity; and he would take himself off in a huff, and we should never have him at home again! But as to what you call receiving her with open arms, my dear, I don't quite see that, I own! It must depend upon what sort of girl she is in herself—whether she is a *good* girl and of a nice disposition, and likely to influence dear Frank in the right direction. I am not prepared to say that I shall even kiss her on first arriving—or at any rate only quite a *little* kiss, just for form's sake. I certainly shall not—not *embrace* her, Constance: it would be going too far, and I might not be able to follow it up afterwards. Nobody could expect

us to be demonstrative, my dear, under the circumstances.'

Constance shrugged her shoulders again, and showed an inscrutable face to the fire. It hardly seemed worth the trouble of explaining that she had been speaking satirically. 'Well, as to embracing, mother,' she remarked, 'I'm not much given that way myself, at the best of times, as you sometimes complain; and I expect it will be a long time before *I* hug Frank's young woman. As for you, I foresee that you will do exactly as it—strikes you at the moment! And I don't suppose you will find you have been kissing in haste to repent at leisure. I'm prepared to see you falling in love with Alethea at the first moment, for, according to Frank, she is a perfect paragon of youthful innocence and sweetness, besides having a complexion like a briar rose and the loveliest eyes ever seen.'

'For all that Frank may say, it will be very odd if she *is* pleasing,' went on Lady Elliston, in increasingly plaintive accents, 'brought up, as she must have been, with her parents in a marching regiment, and with hardly a penny to bless themselves with beyond the father's pay! And her mother must be an odd creature, I should gather. Elizabeth de Courcy just remembers her

as one of a set of wild girls from the other side of the county, who could ride bare-back and had no mother to keep them in order! Even Frank says she isn't much to look at, though he would naturally view her *couleur de rose*. Her letters have been friendly enough, certainly, but each time there has seemed to me something very—very *casual*, as Frank would call it, about them. I don't take to her, I must own.'

The daughter laughed. 'I don't think that much matters, mother. She'll be marching away from Gorleston before long, I suppose, to the other end of nowhere, and you and she won't be likely to come across each other often, when once the marriage is an accomplished fact.'

'Do you think so, my dear? Well, I own it would be a relief. But I'm rather surprised to hear *you*, Constance, standing up for Frank's choice. I suppose I am as hard to please as any mother could be—and can you wonder at it, when dear Frank is the only son I've got? But I always thought *you* were even more fastidious than myself. Old nurse used to say, "Miss Connie wouldn't think a royal princess good enough to mate with Master Frank!" and I always thought she was not far wrong as to your ideas for him.'

‘You have got hold of the wrong end of the stick, mother,’ answered Constance, in a voice of mingled pain and irritation—‘*as usual*,’ was her undutiful addition, under her breath—‘*I wasn’t standing up for this chit—is it likely? I was merely reminding you of what Frank says in those most expansive letters of his. I own I always hoped he wouldn’t—I thought perhaps he and I should’—* But there she broke off, under pretence of poking the fire, and turned away her face. There were no tears in her eyes—she was not given to them—but the pain and disappointment of which her heart was full surged up into her face, so that she could not trust it, even under her mother’s not very observant eyes. It was plain that her brother’s engagement had been a great blow to Constance Elliston.

Above the clatter of the poker among the coals the sound of the front-door bell made itself heard. Constance sprang to her feet and looked towards the door. Lady Elliston’s face flushed. She began fumbling nervously at the fastening of the silver-mounted bag in which she kept her pocket-handkerchief. It seemed to be of the first importance to get that article safely stowed away before the new arrivals appeared.

‘Oh, my dear, *there* they are!’ she cried. ‘Run

down and meet them—do, *please*! Frank will think us *so* ungracious. You know I dare not expose myself to the draught; but somebody ought to go.'

'No,' said Constance decidedly. 'I'm sure she would rather not. If she is shy, as Frank says, it will only make her worse. I should hate to be rushed at in the hall, were I in her place.' She moved away to the writing-table, and—with hands that trembled, despite her self-possessed tone—was busy turning over the papers there when the door was thrown open, and a familiar voice made itself heard, crying, 'Here we are at last, mother!'

Lady Elliston had risen from her seat by the fire, all one nervous flutter. She was sure Frank would be surprised and displeased at there being no one in the hall to greet him and his *fiancée* on this most special occasion; yet she had been too well drilled in the duty of taking care of herself to dare descend there, as her heart throbbed to do. In all eagerness to atone for the apparent neglect, she started, on the first sounds of approach, in a hasty, rustling progress across the room, with both hands outstretched and rainbow smiles of welcome on her face. 'My dear, dear boy! Have you really brought her?' she cried; and Constance smiled grimly to herself over the next sound that

fell on her ear—the sound of kisses that were by no means cold or formal ones.

‘Didn’t I tell you so?’ she muttered, and then faced about to behold Frank’s familiar figure standing in the middle of the room, and beside him a slim, girlish personage whose form and face were alike indistinct, both on account of the dim light and because they were still partly hidden in the folds of Lady Elliston’s embrace. The good lady was ‘committing herself’ as fast as ever she could; and it seemed the less necessary because her future daughter-in-law was meeting her by no means half-way, but was receiving her caresses with shy inexpansiveness, and giving only a chilly, timid kiss in return.

‘Con, where are you?’ Frank’s voice exclaimed, in brotherly accents. ‘Come along and speak to Alethea! Alethea, this is my sister, whom I’ve told you a great deal about, haven’t I? You won’t be strangers.’

‘Dear me! I wonder what his information consisted of?’ was his sister’s thought, as she encountered a wistful, beseeching glance, darted at her by the new-comer. The hand put into hers was so small, chilly, and shrinking, that her heart was touched, and she found it easier than she had expected to kiss its owner’s equally

cold cheek, and speak to her in tolerably friendly tones.

Lady Elliston, from over Frank's shoulder, was murmuring incoherent welcomes in the most affectionate voice, and expressing her delight at seeing 'the dear child' actually in Chester Square 'at last.' Any similar expressions of welcome were more than Constance could bring herself to utter; but she invited Alethea, in a tone that was sufficiently genial, to come to the fire to warm her hands, and pitied her for having had such a cold day for travelling.

Frank, who was manifestly nervous, began a string of small comments on their journey, and launched into vehement abuse of the Great Eastern Railway for the lateness of its trains. Alethea obediently took off her gloves and held her numbed fingers to the fire; but the frost, or some other cause, seemed to have benumbed her tongue also; and Frank talked the faster for the pair of them.

The entrance of the lamp and tea made a welcome diversion. Constance withdrew her formidable presence behind the hissing kettle, and Lady Elliston, who had subsided on her sofa again, patted the chintz seat beside her invitingly, and said, in her soft, plaintive tones, 'Come and sit

here, my dear, and let me have a good look at you. This is the warmest corner in the room, and we will be cosy in it together. Frank shall bring you your tea over here, and you and I will make friends.'

Alethea responded to the invitation in nervous haste; but at least this douce lady, in her white shawl, was not personally alarming, and the girl soon began to thaw a little in her friendly atmosphere. She found her smiles, and the power to answer such questions as were put to her. Frank pulled up a chair and joined in, with openly pleased looks; it was evident that, as the French say, *une entente cordiale* was already becoming established between Alethea and her future mother-in-law; and that, at any rate, was a relief and satisfaction.


As for Constance, she silently plied her tea-making craft, and, through the softening clouds rising from the tea-kettle, watched the faces on the other side of the hearthrug. Her brother's smiling looks—speaking of a happiness in which she had no share—gave her a stab like the thrust of a knife, and she passed hastily on to gaze at Alethea. Her pretty looks were of the kind that the cold plays havoc with; but now the colour was beginning to come back into her cheeks and the sparkle to her eyes.

‘ Oh, Frank, Frank, *what* a little green goose you have caught! And as if *you* were the sort of person to mould character and teach the young idea to shoot! What on earth are you going to make of her—you, the laziest of men?’ These were his sister’s reflections as she looked and listened.

Alethea glanced up once, and caught the full gaze of those lively dark eyes focused on herself. She blushed and faltered, and, for a minute, froze up again into the icicle she had been at first. But then Frank rose, broad-shouldered and smiling, across her field of vision; and when her eyes were upon his, her courage came back with a rush. The pretty colour mantled yet more deeply in her cheeks, and a charming smile shone in her eyes, though her lips kept their seriousness. She felt she could do and bear anything with him to protect her. Another of Constance’s private observations was to the effect that this baby was at least sufficiently developed to be heartily in love. She hardly knew whether she was glad or sorry.

CHAPTER III

BROTHER AND SISTER

T will be seen that matters had made a large advance since the evening when young Elliston and Miss Mordaunt had first come across each other on Gorleston Pier. Then they were entire strangers, ignorant even of each other's names; now they are an engaged couple, and as thoroughly acquainted with each other's views, tastes, and opinions as it may be supposed that engaged couples usually are after a period of two months. That statement, however, needs some qualifying. Elliston was as completely in possession of his little *fiancée's* thoughts and aims as the most exacting lover need wish to be. He knew all her simple history; there was not a fold of her innocent mind and character undiscovered to him. During long sunny afternoons of fishing on Breydon Water, and evening walks up and down the pier, he had come to

know her through and through, and to love her with a tenderness that had a dash of awe in it.

On his side, too, much had been told. Alethea was quite as much delighted to listen as she was to chatter; and, under the encouragement of her happy eyes, he had told her many things about his Eton and Oxford days, and about the days longer ago when he and Constance had played and quarrelled and fought together in the Chester Square nursery and garden. He had imparted his ideas to her, too, about art and music and poetry—for he was a young man of ideas, had read a good deal, and had a fairly cultivated taste—and had shown her a manuscript book of poems which had never yet been beheld by mortal eyes other than his own. That he possessed tastes and habits about which he did not care to talk to her, and that there was a side to his life which he kept in the background, away from the gaze of those sweet eyes, were things of which the young girl had no conception. She fancied his soul as open to her as was hers to him; and whatever loose and tangled threads there might be in the web of rambling narratives, which took their turn with happy silences to fill the spaces of those golden afternoons, were either unperceived by her in-

experience, or were unconsciously caught up by her loving confidence and woven into a perfect whole. In her eyes he was entirely charming, and as good as he was delightful!

It will be seen, therefore, that matters between the two young people were on a very different footing in November from what they had been in September; but the later stage was so natural and obvious a development of the earlier one, that it is not worth lingering to tell it in detail. Given a young bachelor who can do as he pleases, and a maiden, hitherto fancy free; given circumstances favourable for his making a good first impression, and a friendly mother as *Dea ex machina*, who is most happy to give him the chance of following it up; and the 'answer' to this problem will infallibly be—an engaged couple.

Frank Elliston had lingered on at Gorleston until the 'day or two' of his original intention—which had merely been to fill a gap between two shooting invitations—had crept into a month. Just as his home people were becoming actively puzzled and inquisitive as to what *could* be keeping him at Gorleston, and as Constance was meditating a descent upon the place, under pretext of wanting a week's sea air, there had come the news of his engagement to 'the sweetest girl in the world,

whose name is as charming as herself—Alethea Mordaunt.’

Great had been the consternation in Chester Square. It was hardly to be expected that Frank’s relatives should be pleased at the engagement, for his late father had been a distinguished Indian civil servant, and a man of good family to boot, and his mother was an earl’s granddaughter; while Frank himself had inherited a fair estate from an uncle, and was to be the recipient of a substantial sum in cash at another uncle’s death. He was therefore a young man who could afford to pick and choose, and was expected to marry ‘well.’ His mother had often discussed the kind of girl she would like her dear boy to select, and evidently thought that he could hardly aspire too high. Constance, when the subject came up in conversation, was wont to say something vague and non-committal, while she pinched her fingers together and silently hoped that he would never marry at all. His sister knew more about his ways than did anyone else outside the circle of his personal friends, and she felt that any girl who was good and clever enough for Frank would inevitably disapprove of some of his habits; while to see him marry a fast, vulgar-minded creature who ‘would swallow anything,’ was not to be

thought of. So Constance hugged to her bosom the hope that her brother—who fell slightly in love every season, and had, so far, always fallen out again during the ensuing months of distance and deprivation—would end by having herself as his life's companion—his old sister, who loved him with a fierce tenacity that few guessed at, and passed by his faults and follies with a tolerance that she would have scorned to show towards any other human being. She was convinced that she could make him happier than anyone else could do; and she yearned, with a hungry yearning, to be the only maker of his life's content—to be the one to whom, in the long-run, he would always turn for comfort and companionship, and whom he should never, under the hardest circumstances, find wanting.

So when the news reached Chester Square that Frank had engaged himself to a girl with no pretensions of any kind—to a 'nobody' whom, as she would have said, it was impossible to 'explain' to people, Lady Elliston wept and lamented herself, was very poorly, and quite enjoyed the sympathy of the few old friends who were back in town at the end of September, and were thus available to come and condole—over cups of tea—about the trying news. Constance said nothing, and footed

the way to her various committees more diligently than ever. If her eye had a dangerous glitter in it when other people were unpunctual or behind-hand in their work or showed a disposition to be trivial in their remarks, that was the only sign of her secret perturbation possible to detect. If she raged and fretted inwardly; if she carried a leaden heart in her breast; if she even sometimes cried, at night, when she was quite alone in the dark, over the thought that she had lost her Frank—he would need her and turn to her no longer, and all her life's happiness had vanished—no one guessed at the bitterness of her disappointment, or divined how lonely and disconsolate she was.

It was partly, we must suppose, because there was no one to do it—no father or elder brother ready to give good advice and utter counsels of prudence—and partly because Frank, from his youth up, had invariably got his own way, that no one tried to interfere with the engagement or suggest its being broken off. Lady Elliston, it was true, wrote her son feeble protests, covering pages and pages of lilac notepaper in a pointed, scrawling hand; but nobody was given to taking her opinions seriously, least of all her own children; and by degrees the objections died away, and little sprouts of kindness began to show themselves in her

letters, like green leaves in the spring-time. Frank smiled, and wrote in answer with tactful pleasantness, and the sprouts grew bigger and more decided, like the trees' response to April showers.

Constance, for her part, wrote nothing at all, but her silence spoke more eloquently than many words; and though she at length—when matters were too far advanced for any hope that the engagement would come to nothing—sent a note to Alethea, Frank knew acutely how his sister felt about the matter, and his instinct told him that he should have to reckon with her whenever they came face to face.

Her mother, too, knew that 'Connie didn't like it,' although, as it was the sister's way to stand up for her brother on all occasions and maintain that everything he did and said was right, she stood up for this thing too, when driven right into a corner and compelled to express herself about it. But Lady Elliston knew, by the hard ring in her daughter's voice, that she disliked the engagement, and made various little nervous attempts to propitiate Constance on behalf of Frank's choice. Her instinct failed to show her that she had very much better have left the subject alone.

Frank Elliston had a general intention of, at

some time or other (when he should marry, most likely), settling down on his estate and leading the life of a country gentleman; but for the present the place was let—which was much less trouble—and he lived at home, had chambers in the Temple, and pursued the calling of a barrister with very few briefs. He had just begun his autumn holiday when he met his fate at Gorleston, and before October brought the opening of the Courts and called him back to town again, everything was arranged; the engagement was an accepted matter in both families, and had even made its way into the *Morning Post*. The mothers had exchanged notes, containing vague proffers of friendliness, which somehow had an unreal ring about them; and Alethea's father had written from India—an honest, manly, simple letter, which made Lady Elliston cry, and which even Constance received without criticism.

The next move in the game had, in its turn, been made—that of inviting the little *fiancée* to visit her future relatives; and Frank had just taken a few days' leave from his chambers and gone down to Gorleston to fetch her up. It had so happened that his mother and sister had started on their annual round of visits among Lady Elliston's relatives before Frank's holiday had

ended, and they had only returned home since his recent departure to Suffolk to fetch Alethea. It thus fell out that this was not only the first introduction of his future wife, but also the first meeting between himself and his home circle since his engagement had taken place; and the fact that it was so made even that self-assured young man uncomfortable and nervous.

‘How absurd! As if I *could* be afraid of old Con,’ he said to himself; but for all that he *was* afraid of her, and nervous over the first impressions that Alethea should make. He kept trying to catch his sister’s eye, with propitiatory glances, and dashed in, with an explanation or remark, whenever she spoke to Alethea, in a way that half diverted and half angered her.

The evening passed off as pleasantly as might be under these adverse currents of feeling. Alethea appeared at dinner-time in a shabby blue frock which did not set off her prettiness, and with white cheeks and a rather forlorn air. In the dining-room she could neither eat nor talk. After the meal was over, Constance disappeared, to interview a ‘case,’ in a private sanctum of her own, and left her mother and their guest to repair to the drawing-room by themselves—a combination of circumstances which turned out

extremely well. When Frank followed them upstairs, after a cigar of the shortest, he found the air full of a warm and cosy peace, and Alethea and his mother side by side on the sofa, looking happy and well satisfied with each other's company.

He was so much delighted with the aspect of things that he stole out of the room again unperceived, lest he should disturb the process of making friends, and settled himself downstairs for another cigar, over which he fell asleep. But when, half an hour later, he returned to the drawing-room, he was disappointed to find that the conditions had changed. Alethea was no longer on the sofa, with her hand in Lady Elliston's, but sitting straight and stiff on the other side of the hearth-rug, with a nervous, constrained look on her face. Constance was placed a little way from her, with some scarlet knitting in her hands, evidently trying to make conversation for her guest, and not finding the task an easy one. Lady Elliston had opened her perpetual novel, and was nodding over its pages.

A change seemed to have come over the atmosphere of the room, and the temperature to have fallen by several degrees. Frank exclaimed on the coldness of the night, and poked the fire

with vehemence; but perhaps it was more a mental change than a physical one which had taken place. The subtle chill of antagonism had stolen in once more, and was weighing, unconsciously, upon all present. Frank sat himself down and did his best to talk—asking questions about Constance's visits, and giving information about the scenery and antiquities of North-east Suffolk; but on all sides there was a consciousness of effort, and nobody was sorry when bed-time came.

When the ladies had disappeared, Frank still lingered in the drawing-room, with the ostensible purpose of looking for a book to read. The butler came and carried off the lamp; but still he lingered, and even made up the fire again. At last the rustle of a dress made itself heard on the stairs, the door opened, and his sister's voice exclaimed, 'Are you here still, Frank? I have not heard you go downstairs.'

'Yes, I'm here. I thought I should catch you if I stayed; for I saw you casting longing eyes at that treadmill of yours, and felt sure you would be coming back to finish some job or other.'

'Oh, well—I wasn't coming after anything in particular,' answered Constance, with a short laugh. She was not going to confess that what had brought

her downstairs again was the longing to see Frank—to see him and have him to herself for a few minutes. Though, after all, as she privately told herself, it was but a poor sort of pleasure *now*.

‘Well, then, come and sit you down, old girl, and have a crack. Do you realise that we haven’t met since the end of July? I’ll have a cigar here—the *mater* will never find out!’ Frank pushed up a chair for his sister close to the glowing hearth, and tried to speak in the tone of old days, which only brought the consciousness of the change more vividly before Constance’s mind. She would not sit down, but remained standing by the fire, fingering the ornaments on the mantelpiece with a touch less firm than usual. The ruddy glow threw dull lights across her black satin dress and gleamed on her white arms; but she kept her face turned away, lest the firelight should reveal that her lips were trembling.

Her brother eyed her askance between the puffs of his cigar, wishing she would turn her face and discover in what sort of mood she was. He hoped she had come back to make friends; but somehow she was slow in beginning, and the turn of her neck and shoulders, in her admirably fitting dress, looked rigid and unpromising. Had she come to ‘make it hot’ for him?—to tell him what a

stupid choice he had made?—and, in point of fact, how much she disliked his marrying at all? Well, if so, he should have to make her understand that he was too old to be dictated to, and that he expected his people to be civil to the girl whom he chose to marry, etc. etc.! But, of all people in the world, he most hated being on bad terms with his sister, whose company suited him exactly, and on whom he depended, for his comfort and well-being, more than on anybody else. He wished she would speak and show him how the wind lay!

The moment came, at last, when any speech was less intolerable than silence. Frank took his cigar out of his mouth, and said abruptly, with a nervous laugh, ‘I—I suppose you were prepared for my doing this some time or other, Connie?’

‘For your doing what?’

‘Why, getting myself engaged to be married. It wasn’t exactly a surprise, was it? You see, if I’m to do it at all, it’s about time I was thinking of it. And there’s Ashenden to be considered. I often think I ought soon to be taking up my abode there; and a place like that wants a lady at the head of it, you must agree.’

A twinge of pain shot through Constance. London-bred though she was, she passionately

loved the country and its ways and doings; and the thought of living some day as mistress of that rambling old manor-house among the Yorkshire moors had been one of her pleasantest dreams. She made no reply. There was such a choking in her throat that, for the minute, speech was impossible.

‘It wasn’t as if I could have had *you* at Ashenden,’ went on Frank, seizing, in nervous haste, upon any plea which looked like a justification of his step. ‘I know, of course, that there’s the *mater* to be thought of; and Ashenden isn’t a bit the sort of place for an old lady to live in, it’s so bleak and so desperately lonely. And besides, mother is so wedded to London—I don’t think she’d survive transplantation anywhere else. And of course you can’t leave her to come and live with me—although I am sure no one could manage a big house like that better than *you*, Con. And, you see, everybody expects a fellow to marry, if he’s got rather more of the wherewithal than most of the men about. A place like Ashenden can’t be let to pass out of the family. And then, too’—

‘Oh, Frank,’ broke in his sister, with a laugh more impatient than joyful, ‘what *is* the use of talking about it? Do pray leave off racking your brains to find excuses for doing what everybody

has been expecting you to do ever since you came into Ashenden! Why, it was the most obvious thing in the world that you should marry; and I'm tired to death of having people ask me when you were going to do so. It's quite a relief to know there'll be no more of that!'

'Well, but I'm afraid, if you are not surprised, at any rate you are—*sorry* about it,' went on Frank tentatively. He felt that he was getting on delicate ground. 'You and I have always been such chums, and we have done so many things together and had such roaring times—climbing mountains, and making riding tours, and all the rest of it. And—and I'm afraid it will be dull work for you when I'm out of the way. But you must not think my doing this means that your company has ever grown stale to me, or ever will; or that I shan't want you just as much as ever. Alethea is only a child—and young at that! There are thousands of things she doesn't understand or know about, and which there's no reason she should. She has got no elder brothers, you know; and she has never lived in London; and of course she doesn't know what a London man's ways are like—whereas *you*, old fellow'—

'There now, Frank, that's enough,' broke in his sister again, cutting across the stream of his

hurried talk with her brief, trenchant utterances. 'I never was one to cry over spilt milk, and I trust I am not going to begin now. We both of us, I hope, understand how the matter lies, and neither need nor expect any sentimental disguises. We have had good times together, it is true; but nobody in their senses expects good times to go on for ever. Perhaps I thought—I fancied they *might* have gone on'— There was a shade of faltering in Constance's voice, and the lid of an Oriental vase quivered in her hands and played a warning note on the edge of its corresponding pot. She broke off, as if absorbed in the task of adjusting it as exactly as possible; and when it was in its place, went on in a lighter tone, 'You've done what you — *liked*, old boy, as you generally do, and as I always expected you would do, in the matter of marrying, when it came to the point; and I am sure I am very glad of it. I believe in people's doing as they like; it takes a great deal of responsibility off others, and saves the making of sacrifices that are apt to be—not a shining success! As for your wanting much from me in time to come, I'm rather sceptical about it; but whatever I have got to give is very much at your service, now and always, old fellow, as I am sure you know.'

Frank was silent a minute. He had wanted to be affectionate and sympathetic with his sister—whom he sincerely pitied for the prospective loss of his presence and companionship—and it was rather baffling to be met, in response, by this somewhat cynical joking. However, it generally proved least trouble all round to take things lightly; and if Connie chose to maintain that she was neither surprised nor sorry at these coming changes, well—so much the easier for him. He, at any rate, had shown himself to be in a proper brotherly frame of mind; and if the understanding between them were rather a hollow one, it could not be helped. No doubt time would mend it. What really mattered most, just now, was to try and win Constance over, not to the fact of his marrying in general, but to the girl of his choice in particular—to the timid, inexperienced, impressionable child whom his action had thrown into such close relationship with her. It was amusing work—if it had not been so anxious—to think of Alethea Mordaunt and Constance Elliston side by side—the one so mature, so decided, so ‘up to date,’ so capable and well trained in all her faculties, so experienced in London life and human nature on their seamy side, through the arduous and difficult work she

was ever diligently pursuing. Alethea, beside her, seemed even more childlike and irresponsible than she really was; she was so transparent and impulsive, so ignorant of the ways of the world, so unready at reply, save by soft, beseeching looks, so ill supplied with the small coin of conversation, so full of small fancies and prejudices—nay, even small self-assertions—such as the levelling intercourse of town life suppresses or hides under a layer of society varnish. What sort of effect would two people so totally unlike have upon each other? How would they fit in harmoniously side by side, even for a few weeks? A remembrance of the old fable of the brazen pot and the earthen one bumping each other in mid-stream, and of the disastrous consequences to one of them, flitted uncomfortably through Frank's brain while he cast about for the best means of bringing the new topic upon the *tapis*.

'Well, Con,' he said, after a pause, 'I'm only too thankful you don't bear me a grudge for getting engaged at all—for, do you know, old girl, I was half afraid you mightn't like it, though you always have been such a jolly old sister to me? That *is* a weight off my mind! And I flatter myself you can't have much fault to find with the girl I have chosen. Isn't she a little darling?

Aren't her eyes as lovely as I said, or lovelier? And isn't she deliciously fresh and innocent in her ways?'

Constance stamped her foot privately under the shelter of her skirts. It was hard enough to have the acquiescence, which had cost her such an effort, so lightly accepted; but to be asked to sing the praises of this child who had stolen her brother away from her was more than could be expected of flesh and blood.

'Oh, I daresay she will be passably nice-looking when she has got over her journey—and her eyes are an uncommon colour, certainly,' was the most that she could bring herself to say. 'And she is *young* enough, in all conscience,' she added, after a minute. 'Has she *ever* been away from home before, Frank? She seems to me the most elementary young person I ever came across. I must say I should have thought your taste would prefer someone a little more—*finished*, don't you know!'

Frank jumped up and threw the end of his cigar into the fire with a movement of impatience. 'I admit she's not one of your brazen-faced London girls, who can make pert speeches before they can walk, and have had all sorts of experiences before they are twenty,' he rejoined, in a tone of

suppressed irritation. 'But she's not at all *bornée*, if that's what you mean — and I never knew anyone with quicker or truer perceptions, or more innate good taste. And she has read a good deal, in an old-fashioned sort of way, and can play prettily, and has a very sweet voice. I intend her to have some singing lessons, by the way, and thought you would put me up to the best person to get for a beginner. Of course, I grant you she's shy, and hasn't, as yet, been out much; but she's not a bit awkward or stupid in her ways, and has a nice little manner of her own. And if you only knew how innocent and good she is—I declare it often makes a fellow like me feel queer all over to hear her talk!'

'Oh, granted she has every virtue under the sun!' cried Constance, whose self-control was nearing its limits, 'still, you must allow that she needs a good deal of developing and what boys would call "licking into shape," before you can expect people in general to recognise her as a—well, let us say a grown-up young lady. Why, I suppose she has never been to a ball in her life; and she doesn't seem to have the most elementary ideas about conversation. She wants any amount done for her to make her a companion fit for you, year in, year out — you *know* she does, Frank!

Why, she is eleven years younger than you, to begin with, and twenty at least in mind and experience and *savoir faire*. And who's going to take her in hand and develop her? Are *you*? It will be a very new rôle to see you in, and one which I should hardly expect you to carry through!'

Frank was hot and angry too; but, easy-going though he was, he could master himself when there was a point in view that he cared to gain. 'Why, Connie, you are so sharp, as a rule, at seeing things,' he said, in a friendly tone. 'Don't you perceive it is just her youthfulness and innocence—her *greenness*, if you will—which are the attraction for a fellow like me? Why, I believe I worship the ground she treads on; and I feel as if—if she only keeps as white a soul as she has now—I shall have to turn over a new leaf myself, before the end of the chapter, so as to feel less small beside her! But I quite acknowledge she wants bringing out, and showing the ways of the world, and all that sort of thing, and I look to you and mother—most of all to *you*, old Con—to do that part of the business. Who can do it so well as you, if you will only care enough for it to take it thoroughly in hand? We know what the *mater* is like—she'd coo and purr

over Alethea, and give her new frocks and take her to tea-parties, if she were as ugly as sin and no more to her than the man in the moon—but it's *you* that really matters. You rule the roost in this house, and if you set your face against that poor child and give her the cold shoulder—why, I shall wish to goodness I had never brought her here at all!’ Frank spoke with real feeling, and his lip was quivering under his moustache. He and his sister were facing one another, now, on the hearthrug; she standing very rigid and upright, with her arms crossed before her; he with one hand clutching nervously at his coat-collar and the other stretched out in Constance's direction. He tried hard to make her look at him, but she kept her eyes sullenly averted, lest she should see his pleading glance, though the tension of her attitude was beginning to relax and she was feeling the tears perilously near at hand.

Frank began again. ‘You've been doing me good turns, sis, and getting me out of scrapes, all my days, like the trump of a sister that you are!—and I can't remember a single thing I ever asked you to do for me that you haven't done. Well—I never asked for anything that I cared a hundredth part as much about as I do about this that I am asking you now—that you should be

kind to my little girl and love her for my sake. Now will you ?'

Constance felt she must either laugh or cry, and—as was generally the case—she chose the former. 'You ridiculous fellow,' she exclaimed, 'what evil designs do you suspect me of, that you plead for your infant lady-love so piteously? Do you think I mean to treat her like Cinderella, or beat her black and blue? Make your mind easy—I'll be as good to her as it's in my nature to be, and give her the benefit of as much of my social wisdom as she is able to absorb. I suppose you guarantee her being willing to take me as mentor?' She turned as she spoke and made for the door. Despite her laughing tone, it was a very white face that went past Frank in the firelight.

'Oh, thank you, Con; that *is* good of you,' said he, following nervously in the wake of her satin skirts. He was puzzled and a little affronted by her bantering tone, but was anxious to take it at the most it was worth. 'You need not be afraid, Alethea will be only too grateful for hints; she is delightfully docile and teachable, and will be thankful to get under your wing. It is indeed good of you to take her in hand.'

'All right, then, that's agreed. I'll spread my

raven pinions over your dove !' answered Constance lightly, as her brother opened the door for her. And then she turned suddenly and threw her arms round his neck with a convulsive clutch. 'Oh, Frank, I could have made you so happy !' she cried, with a strangled sob, then vanished upstairs in a rustling whirlwind, leaving him startled into a passing consciousness of how great was the self-sacrifice he had asked.

CHAPTER IV

A COMMON-SENSE VIEW

WELL, there's one thing to be said for her —she's no trouble to amuse!' thought Constance to herself, as she paused a moment, in the task of drawing up a report for one of her committees, to rest her hand and survey her work as a whole. Her eyes had wandered to where Alethea was sitting by the fire, in a luxurious attitude, with her head on her hand, and her eyes fixed on the pages of a book in her lap.

The two were located in a tiny room at the back of the house, known as 'Constance's office.' It was a most business-like little place, with its ample writing-table, shelves loaded with books, and pigeon-holes full of papers, and bore the stamp of its owner's methodical habits and capacity for work in the neatness of its arrangements. Constance herself, in the trimmest of dresses, and with the smoothest of fashionably dressed heads, matched

her surroundings. She looked the embodiment of capable industry, as she sat, upright and square, before her desk.

The only thing in the room suggesting ease and the pleasures of life was the big luxurious chair by the fire. Constance had bought it and installed it there as a standing invitation to her brother, who often used to occupy it, in the morning, till it was time to go to the Temple. It had cost its owner some pangs to see Alethea take possession of it, as she had done with a keen sense of enjoyment, upon being invited by Constance—as a great favour—to share her room when she was not wanted by Lady Elliston.

Very pretty the girl looked as she sat there, with the light from the one tall window falling on her head and lighting up its wavy bright brown locks of hair, with the golden shine in their high lights. Her pretty profile was sharply defined against a dark blue screen by the fire, which set off the rose-tints of her complexion and enhanced the warm colours of her hair. Alethea was like an antelope in her movements, with a simple, untaught grace that made all her attitudes charming; and Constance's cultivated eye could not help resting with enjoyment on the graceful pose of the slim young figure filling the big chair.

On the rug beside Alethea, heaped in a basket, was a large piece of fancy work from a Regent Street shop, with a mass of rainbow-tinted silks for the working of the same. Lady Elliston had set her up with it, and taught her the stitch, to the girl's huge delight; and she laboured away with zeal, during long hours of sitting in the drawing-room, and keeping her future mother-in-law company. At the present moment, however, the charms of Edna Lyall were contending with the charms of embroidery, and Alethea had let her work slide down to the floor while she absorbed herself in the fortunes of Erica Raeburn and Brian Osmond.

Alethea had now been a fortnight in Chester Square, and by this time was enjoying her life there more than she would at first have believed it ever possible to do. The first few days of her visit had been for the most part a walking nightmare to her—the only break in their discomfort being the short times which she spent alone with her *fiancé*, when she could nestle up to him and pour out all her woes. Everything was so horridly new and so different to what she had been accustomed to; and Alethea was by no means one of the bold spirits who enjoy change for its own sake and welcome new things because they are new. The

mental atmosphere in which she found herself was not more different from the homely, simple ways of home than were the foggy air and clouded skies from the brisk, clear, wind-swept atmosphere of the eastern counties. The girl felt bewildered and oppressed—afraid to speak, lest she should be saying the wrong thing—afraid to be herself, because what was natural to her seemed so very unnatural to these polished, punctilious people.

By degrees, however, this state of misery had worn off. In their daily evening *tête-à-tête* Frank was very tender and soothing, and the sense that in his eyes she was all that heart could wish was a constant standby; with one so kind and so easily pleased as Lady Elliston, nobody could long be nervous and constrained; and as for Constance—she followed what was undoubtedly the kindest plan under the circumstances, and let her charge alone till such time as she should have grown accustomed to her new surroundings. In fact, Alethea had found her future sister-in-law much more good-natured and less formidable than she had been led to expect. So, little by little, the child had expanded, had learnt to move and speak freely, and had even developed a shy, youthful charm of her own, and a brightness of gesture and

manner which enchanted Lady Elliston and set off her slender, girlish prettiness to the utmost.

Alethea presently found out that she was enjoying herself to the top of her bent, and having a delightful time of it. As Constance said, it took very little to amuse her. A drive in the Park with Lady Elliston, in the brougham, was an exciting treat, and a round of shopping and calls equally delightful. The stock sights of London were all new and wonderful to her unsophisticated senses. Although Frank was supposed to be at work again, the hours of a briefless barrister are generally elastic, and there was leisure for delightful walks and expeditions to picture-galleries and museums.

Then, too, there were the comfort and pleasantness of the luxurious house, which quickly cast their spell over Alethea—used to ‘plain living,’ if not, exactly, to ‘high thinking,’ at home. The late hours in a morning, the bedroom fires, all the various appliances for making life slip along easily on well-oiled wheels, were pleasant to her, and gave an undefined but very sensible feeling of well-being. Above all, Alethea was blissfully happy and completely at rest in the region of her affections. Frank was all that heart could wish—kind, loving, and attentive. She was sad every morning when

the time came for him to depart, and her heart grew happier every hour as the time approached that should bring him home again. The flowers he brought her, and the new books, and other small attentions, gave her the most unfeigned delight, and she was as happy as a child in the midst of her new possessions.

Those shortening days, with their dun skies and the feeble flickers of sunset behind the leafless trees of the square, were days of unclouded happiness to little Alethea. Lady Elliston grew more and more delighted with her, and told Frank, with tears in her eyes, that she already loved her like a daughter. Constance either was, or appeared to be, even more than usually busy with her charitable work, and took very little apparent heed of the new inmate of her home. She talked pleasantly to Alethea when they happened to be together, and sent her maid to do her hair for her in the newest style, but otherwise left her very much to herself. For all her apparent recollection of it, the promise given to her brother, to take his future wife in hand and show her the way she should go, might never have been uttered.

Constance Elliston, however, was a person who never forgot her promises, or forewent her intentions. Perhaps an incident in that morning's talk

at breakfast — when Alethea had been unwise enough to contradict her on some point upon which Constance knew herself to be an authority—had made her realise that the new-comer was now thoroughly at ease, and might be taken in hand without fear of being frightened away; or there was some other reason patent to her busy brain. At any rate, when the report was finished, corrected, and consigned to its envelope, instead of turning to other work, Constance rose, gave a mighty yawn, and exclaimed, ‘There, that job’s done, and I’m coming over to warm myself.’

She installed herself in a chair on the other side of the fire, put her feet on the fender, and stretched out her square, capable-looking hands towards the blaze. She was not looking at her companion, nor had directly spoken to her, but instinct told Alethea that a talk was intended. With a private sigh—for the fortunes of Erica and her father were at a critical moment, and all matters of daily life faded into unreality beside them—she shut the book and raised her eyes, with a sort of wistful inquiry in them, to Constance’s face.

For some seconds her companion did not speak or look round, and Alethea had leisure to take a fresh survey of her face. She had never studied drawing from the ‘human face divine,’ and did not

recognise what the precise lines were by which that before her conveyed its impression of firmness and force—but for all that she felt anew what a resolute, forceful countenance it was, and her spirit quailed before it. When its owner opened her mouth, however, it was merely to ask some innocent question about the book she had in her hands. Alethea took heart of grace, and began to enlarge upon the merits of the story, and say how greatly she admired the principal characters. The hero, it appeared, was a special admiration of hers, and her face lighted up and she forgot to be afraid of her auditor while she described his charms and excellences.

‘I haven’t read the thing,’ remarked Constance, ‘or if I ever did, it was in the days of long ago, and I’ve forgotten every word of it—but evidently the hero is one of those impossible bundles of perfection who never existed outside the pages of novels. Certain classes of story-books *do* provoke one so on that account—the good people in them are so incredibly good, and the wicked people so inconceivably wicked. They are as impossibly black as the others are white! *Why* can’t authors make their men like real flesh and blood—that is to say, neither black nor white, but a sort of shepherd’s plaid, of both mixed? When *I* write my novel,

my hero shall be a very mixed character—in fact, with more black in him than white, on the whole.’

‘But *then*, you see, the heroine couldn’t love him, not if she was a really nice girl, that is,’ cried Alethea, with eager face. ‘It was because Brian Osmond was so good and so altogether to be trusted that Erica cared for him.’

‘Come, don’t you believe Erica would have loved him just as much if he had been a little *grey*, let us say? People don’t fall in love with each other for their moral characters. There are plenty of other attractions needed.’

‘Ah, but she would never have *begun* to care for him if he hadn’t been the kind of man he was,’ Alethea replied, with conviction. ‘That was the thing that first drew her to him, you see.’

Constance laughed. ‘He was rather a remarkable young man if his goodness was the first thing visible about him, like a carriage-lamp on a dark night!’ she said. ‘It is generally a thing that takes time to find out.’

To that Alethea had no answer ready; she seemed to be thinking it over.

‘Well,’ said Constance, going off on another track, ‘let us suppose she thought him everything that was perfect when she began to fall in love with him, and then, after a bit, when they were

thoroughly fond of each other, discovered that he was not so wonderful after all—in fact, that he was rather a black sheep. What do you think would happen then? Would she go on feeling the same towards him?’

‘Oh *no!*’ cried Alethea, looking at her wide-eyed. ‘How *could* she? Why, it wouldn’t be possible to love him if she found he was a bad man!’

Constance’s face took on a peculiar expression, which Alethea vaguely apprehended, but could not fathom. ‘Oh, well,’ she said, after a moment’s pause, ‘I didn’t mean an out-and-out villain, but—imperfect—with faults and infirmities like other men. Do you think she would leave off loving him then?’

‘Oh yes, she couldn’t help it. He would have—disappointed her.’ There was a sudden drop in Alethea’s voice, as if she were uttering something almost too sad for words.

That odd look deepened on Constance’s face. Alethea dimly wondered if it were not a look of scorn. But before the thought had had time to shape itself in her mind her companion had jumped up and was searching for a book, among a set of evidently special favourites which dwelt on a little shelf apart. ‘You are not made of the same stuff as “James Lee’s Wife,” that’s plain,’ she said,

coming back with a volume of Browning in her hand. 'Listen'—and she read the powerful lines in which the unhappy wife sums up her conclusions about her husband's character, that he is 'just weak earth,' she knows—

' With much in you waste, with many a weed,
And plenty of passions run to seed,
But a little good grain too';

when she tells of her disappointed expectations of the redeeming power of her love, and finally states her attitude, when it has grown plain to her that she can never make a good man of James Lee—

' Well, and if none of these good things came,
What did the failure prove ?
The man was my whole world, all the same,
With his flowers to praise or his weeds to blame,
And either or both to love.'

Constance read well, with great force and expression. When she had finished the poem she glanced at her young companion, with a searching look in her keen dark eyes. Upon anyone less inexperienced than Alethea, and less absorbed, for the time being, in her own affairs, there might have dawned the notion that something less abstract than a question of story-book morality was in her companion's mind. Alethea, however, was merely puzzled, and a little distressed. She had never yet read a line of Browning; and it sounded to her

ears—trained in the school of Scott and Mrs. Hemans — very queer poetry. Moreover, this woman who was speaking, James Lee's wife, had surely a very odd taste in husbands.

‘I don't think I quite—understand,’ she said hesitatingly. ‘And I'm sure she wasn't a nice woman, to love such a horrid man. I should have *hated* him.’

Constance laughed. ‘Do you know what *I* think?’ she said. ‘*I* should say that if a woman had ever grown to love a man—with *real* love, that is — she *couldn't* change, whatever sort of fellow he turned out to be. Why, the very essence of real loving is that it should be unchangeable, isn't it?—at least, that's what I understand every pair of lovers, since the world began, say to each other! Like the fat old stock-dove in the wood, you know, who

“Cooed—and cooed :
And somewhat pensively he wooed ;
He sang of love, with quiet blending,
Slow to begin, and never ending.”

Now isn't it so?’

Alethea looked into the fire and smiled serenely, while the tint of a monthly rose flooded her cheeks. It was all the answer she gave. Constance was touched and almost silenced by the sort of innocent

virginity of her face. 'Why can't I let her dream on, poor little goose?' she asked herself. But then her mind swung back again to the purpose she had formed, and she pursued her way, though half unwillingly. 'You mean to love Frank always, don't you, Alethea? You don't feel as if you would ever change towards him?'

The smile faded out of Alethea's eyes. She looked at her cross-questioner with a steady gravity that made the other feel uncomfortable and almost apologetic. Her question was an impertinent one; there was no denying it!

'Of course I do. I shall love him always. But then Frank is—good.' Her simple little sentences came out crisp and clear. It was not till the last word that she faltered, and a wistful, questioning look flitted like a shadow across her clear eyes. The old worn-out quotation about the 'little rift' came unbidden into Constance's mind, and her heart smote her.


'*Isn't* he good?' went on the girl, after a little pause. It was hard to say whether she were asking a question or asserting a fact—there were inflections of both in her voice. Constance chose to take it as a question, and answered, 'Oh, he's a very good fellow—dear old Frank. But he isn't *perfect*, you know; it's no use fancying that he is.

He has got the kindest of hearts, and he will make you a very good husband; and I think if a woman gets *that*, she ought to be thankful. Only—only it's no good your crying for the moon, child, don't you see? and a perfect man is about as unattainable! I don't want you to—well, to make an idol of Frank, or think him a great deal better than he is. He's not a god at all, but a very—*human*—being—and—and I want you to understand that, and to love him, all the same, with your whole heart and soul. I believe you can do anything with him, in the long-run, if you will only love him enough. And I think you are very lucky to get him, with all my heart I do!' There was a mixture of jest and earnest in Constance's tone which puzzled, as it often did, the simple-minded Alethea, and made her wonder how to take her. She gazed at her now, with perplexed, bewildered eyes, and with the colour mantling in her cheeks.

'I don't know what you mean—Frank *is* good,' she said, at last—this time as an unmistakable assertion of fact. 'And—and'—she added, with a desperate effort to speak steadily, 'I don't need *anybody* to tell me how to love him!' With which attempt at self-assertion, she jumped up and ran away to her own room. Constance thought she heard a sob as the door closed behind her.

CHAPTER V

ELEANOR WILSON

T was plain, from the first moment of their meeting, that Alethea Mordaunt and her future mother-in-law were going to suit each other and be happy together. Lady Elliston's resolve about maintaining a prudent reserve melted away, like frost in the sun, under the appealing looks of those wistful hazel eyes, and before a week was out she was as fond of the girl as if she were already her son's wife. As for Alethea, though by no means naturally stupid or dull in her perceptions, her limited education and country up-bringing had kept her childish and backward for her age, and made her far more shy in manner and less quick at giving and taking than her London contemporaries. Hence she found Lady Elliston's quiet company very restful and comforting. She was not afraid of her—indeed, *knew* she pleased her, and that conscious-

ness made her show herself at her best. She amused the gentle old lady with her innocent chatter, and found out also the way to make her talk in her turn. Lady Elliston loved telling long stories about the days of her youth, and the country gaieties of forty years ago; but Constance was bored by such themes, and always managed to shut her mother up if she showed signs of beginning on those topics. Alethea, however, looked interested and sympathetic, and many were the tales she heard while sitting over her embroidery in the drawing-room, or driving with Lady Elliston on a round of Christmas shopping.

The purchasing of a host of Christmas presents, to correspond with a list of formidable length, which began with her little great-nephew, Lord Torhaven, and ended with the crossing-sweeper by St. Michael's Church, was one of Lady Elliston's great annual labours, and one in which she seldom had any company or encouragement. It was delightful to her to have someone at hand to go round the shops with, and to whom to put such questions as: 'My dear child, *do* you think little Torhaven would like a box of bricks or a suit of armour best? He's only four, you know: would it be risky to give him a sword? Though it can't cut, I know, still he *might* contrive to fall upon it

and run himself through the body, fat as he is! *Don't* you think it's dangerous?'

Then, too, if there was a thing that Lady Elliston enjoyed, it was having somebody to dress. Milliners' and dressmakers' windows had an irresistible attraction for her, and it seemed quite hard that Nature had only presented her with one daughter, and that that one's taste in clothes was so diametrically opposite to her own. It was a real delight to the good lady to discover that Alethea's wardrobe was of a very limited kind so that here was a clear field for the indulging of her passion for pretty frocks and hats—for other people. Alethea was taken to Sloane Street, and furnished with various garments at Lady Elliston's favourite shop. The things were so kindly given that no one could have been vexed over it, least of all one in Alethea's relations to the giver. She was whole-hearted in her delight over her new hat and muff, and the dress and jacket *en suite* which accompanied them. They enhanced her pretty looks, and made Frank's eyes sparkle with genuine pleasure when next he beheld her ready dressed to go out with him.

Alethea's new clothes were also a comfort and support to her during the ceaseless round of tea-parties to which Lady Elliston took her. It may

be supposed that that particular form of society which is best suited to particular people comes to them in the long-run. Undoubtedly afternoon parties were the form of social entertainment which Lady Elliston preferred, and by dint of the gradual amassing of acquaintances, which a residence of many years in London had made easy to her, she now had an average of one afternoon party for every day in the year.

Her daughter had long ago struck, and declined any more to go the round with her mother; but Lady Elliston had never quite left off fancying she 'didn't like going out alone,' and so was immensely delighted to have this smiling, docile, and prettily dressed companion to take about with her. It must be owned that the joys of tea-parties soon began to pall upon poor Alethea. It should in her defence be remembered that she did not know a soul among the various people who thronged the drawing-rooms—all very much alike—which she successively entered in the wake of Lady Elliston's velvet and sables. When her companion happened to think of it, and saw anyone conveniently near whom Alethea might care to talk to, she would introduce her; but she was a lady of a friendly habit, who was 'delighted' to meet a great many people, and she was apt to go sailing across the

floor, with her pleasant, well-bred, smiling looks, in pursuit of some distant acquaintance, to a part of the room where seats were scarce and matrons many, leaving Alethea to subside upon the smallest chair anywhere in view, and sit looking shyly round at the stranger folk about her. The time generally seemed long indeed before Lady Elliston's bonnet ceased nodding, with rhythmical precision, at the bonnet nearest it, and its owner came rustling back, saying, 'My dear, I've been having quite a chat with Mrs. Everton-Smith—so pleased to meet her again—and now we must be moving, or we shan't find a soul left at Lady Vancouver's.'

One afternoon Alethea found herself landed at a particularly dull party, which appeared to consist of a circle of some dozen ladies, all prattling to each other, a group of about four old gentlemen standing up and conversing in the midst, and a bunch of young maidens very smart in their dress, who might be seen gathered together in a tight knot at the tea-table in the back drawing-room, and carrying on a lively chattering among themselves, with the aid of one gentleman, very shy and very youthful.

Alethea had a headache that day, and was feeling the oppressiveness of the smoke-laden atmosphere

by contrast with the clear, stinging airs of the east coast. Her heart was just a little heavy, too, or at any rate a shade less buoyant and untroubled than it had been. Some days had passed since that puzzling talk with Constance, but yet the vaguely disquieting impression it had left would not entirely fade away.

On the evening after that talk, Frank, for some unexplained reason, was late in coming home, so that there was no time for the usual *tête-à-tête* by the drawing-room fire—the hour looked forward to by Alethea all day long. She had longed for it that day even more than usual, and after the dressing-bell rang had lingered on the stairs till the latest possible moment, in the hope of getting a word alone with her lover. It was not till Cousins, the maid, had twice called to her, in respectfully urgent tones, that she went upstairs, reluctant and a little sad. During dinner her eyes kept scanning Frank, with a wistfulness that he could not help noticing, although his brow, too, was clouded and his thoughts much occupied with affairs of his own.

Constance had been detained downstairs after dinner, and when Frank came up to the drawing-room he found Alethea practically alone, Lady

Elliston being secluded from the world in a comfortable nap. He bent over his *fiancée* with a touch on her hair and a murmured word meant to please her, but instead of the usual shy but eager response, she laid a tremulous hand on his arm and whispered, so low that he could scarcely hear, 'Frank dear, you *are* good, *aren't* you?'

Frank had heard a piece of bad news at the club that evening, about a steeple-chase on which he had a considerable bet. He was by no means in a humour to be asked searching questions, but rather in one when he wished to be soothed and made to forget. Constance's tact and insight would have told her this; but the very A B C of Frank and his ways was unknown, in reality, to his poor little *fiancée*.

He almost swore when he heard what she said—almost answered her bitterly and harshly; but he just pulled himself up in time, made some vague reply which was chiefly a caress, and began to talk to her in a strain such as lovers use and which the rest of the world knows nothing about. It silenced Alethea and pleased her, and made her heart flutter with happiness; but when she thought it all over afterwards, the answer she had received did not wholly satisfy her moral sense. Now and then, when idle or downhearted, her thoughts were apt

to hark back to that conversation with Constance, and she would wonder vaguely what her cross-questioner could have been driving at, with her hints and her quotations.

The air of Mrs. Lytcham's drawing-room was very hot, and pervaded with a flavour of mingled coffee and fog, which the scent of a large white azalea only partly dispelled. Lady Elliston, at the very moment of entering, spied a particularly dear friend established by the fireplace, and rustled away in that direction without a look behind. Alethea, left stranded, discovered a round red ottoman standing unoccupied just behind the door, between a screen and the white azalea, and hastened to efface herself on this un-neighbourd stool, to be out of her hostess's way. Here she seated herself, and with nervous fingers fumbled at her fur boa, for the room was so hot that she began to wonder how long she could endure it. Then a sudden attack of shyness overtook her; she felt as if all eyes in the room were fixed upon her unlucky self, and began to feel quite ill with nervousness. She tried to forget her bad feelings by dint of looking at the azalea, and then wished she dared move somewhere out of the reach of its overpowering sweetness. She desperately turned away, to observe the old

gentlemen in the middle of the room ; and suddenly their heads began to move up and down between her and the window, and a horror came over her that she was going to faint and tumble off her red stool on to the floor. She shut her eyes a minute to steady her swimming head ; and on opening them again her attention was diverted by the face of a girl, who was sitting on the far side of the room and peeping out at her from between the heads of two of the ladies in the seated semicircle.

It was such a fresh-looking, pink-cheeked face that was turned towards her, gazing from under a pretty and becoming hat ; and even from that distance Alethea could see the shine and sparkle of the grey eyes and the twinkle of friendly fun in them. Then a hand went up, and its forefinger, with a whimsical crook in it, beckoned to her with an impelling force that was irresistible.

Alethea found herself charging at the old ladies as if there were no such thing as manners ; and somehow a way opened between them, and she sprang into a nook in the window, where there was an empty chair, inviting her to sit down, just opposite the girl who had beckoned to her. It felt, to her forlornness, a perfect haven of refuge.

‘ You looked *so* dismal, sitting there all by yourself,’ said her new friend. ‘ I thought at any

rate it wouldn't be *more* dull for you to come over here, and it would be much nicer for me to have you to talk to. I hope you didn't mind?'

'Oh no, *indeed*, thank you,' said Alethea with fervour. 'I was so thankful to get away from there. I was feeling quite *dreadful*! It is cooler here, and—and *quite* different.'

Her companion laughed. 'I suppose we are both here in attendance on mothers,' she remarked. 'Mine seems to have rooted herself to her chair, and I suppose yours is equally stationary. It must be because the air of Mrs. Lytcham's drawing-room makes people too sleepy to move—it certainly isn't because they are too well entertained with interesting conversation that they stay so long. But I never can get my mother not to accept when Mrs. Lytcham's card makes its appearance. Can you?'

'I've not got a mother—that is to say, not here,' answered Alethea, laughing. 'It is Lady Elliston that I have come with.'

'Oh! I *see*,' said her companion, with just enough emphasis to show that she knew who Alethea must be, and what the connecting link was between her and that lady. 'Mr. Elliston and his sister, and my brothers and I, used to play together in the Square when we were all about three feet long,'

she said, with a smile at Alethea—a smile which took the other's heart by storm for its charming gaiety and friendliness. Alethea thought she had never beheld so engaging a face, or such merry, kindly, fun-loving eyes.

‘Oh, do you live in Chester Square?’ she cried eagerly. ‘I’m so glad.’

‘Well, we don’t exactly live there now, but we are not far from it—in Chester Street. My mother and Lady Elliston have known each other a long time.’

Alethea’s face beamed. Her companion glanced round the room, letting her eyes, with that quiet, humorous shine in them, travel from face to face as if she were studying a collection of pictures. She smiled to herself once or twice, either at her own thoughts or at something which amused her in that group of very ordinary faces. ‘Don’t you like looking at people and trying to guess what they are talking about?’ she asked suddenly, bringing her eyes back to rest upon Alethea.

‘No, I don’t think I do—they all look so exactly alike,’ answered Alethea, who was not in a philosophical mood. ‘And I’m—I’m afraid of staring,’ she added ingenuously.

‘Oh, there are different sorts of staring—it’s only a question of knowing how to do it,’ answered

her neighbour, with mock gravity. 'I assure you it's worth learning—the art of staring politely—and it's just the salvation of one at tea-parties like this. I've had several years of them now, you see—my mother likes somebody to go out with her, and my sister has buried herself for good and all, it seems, at Newnham,—and I used to hate them as much as you do, till I learnt to look out for the funny side of them, you see. "There's none so queer as folks," as Becky, my old nurse, is fond of saying; and I've discovered the truth of it through learning to use my eyes at kettledrums—as I imagine some of the people here would still call them.'

'Why do you think I hate parties?' asked Alethea, laughing. 'I never said so.'

'No, but your face did. You looked so very disconsolate—exactly like *impatience* on a monument.'

Alethea laughed again. 'I've only had two or three weeks of them—I *oughtn't* to hate them so much. And I don't think I do, exactly—though one *is* very much like another; don't you think so?—but I've got a headache to-day, and—London *is* a stuffy place.'

Alethea gave a little gasp, like a bird in a cage wanting air; and her companion looked at her with

friendly interest, and led her on to talk of the joys of the Norfolk sunshine, and the keen, refreshing winds that were always blowing there. She also did Alethea another good turn, by dashing boldly into that charmed circle round the tea-table—whereof the members, though present on purpose to administer the good things, had entirely overlooked her—and bringing away a cup of coffee for her companion, which the latter keenly appreciated.

During a pause in their talk, Alethea, with a flush and evident effort, said shyly, ‘Do you—do you really get to know what people are like by looking at their faces? I wish *I* could, then! People *do* seem to me so puzzling up here in London—they all wear masks, I think, and look so much alike; and yet I suppose—at least someone keeps telling me—they are not a bit like what I imagine them to be, underneath. It’s very confusing.’

Alethea heaved a big sigh, and looked away across the room with a puckered brow. It was evident that she was speaking—though in general terms—of something which was a real difficulty to her; but what that something might be, her companion, quick-sighted and sympathetic though she was, had no clue to discover. She could give

a shrewd guess, though, that the 'someone' was Constance Elliston, and had already been wondering, with lively amusement, what her ancient playmate and standing rival of the Square garden was making of this very gentle and unsophisticated little personage. The wish to help her fellow-creatures, however, was even stronger in Eleanor Wilson's heart than her enjoyment as an onlooker and student of their ways; and she said, with that sort of merry gentleness which had already a charm for Alethea, 'Oh, well, it's rather misleading, you know, and is apt to tumble one into ghastly mistakes—as, for instance, when I made up my mind that my form-mistress at school had absolutely no perception of the ludicrous, and she was laughing at me all the time! I nearly made an enemy of her for life, instead of one of my greatest friends. I expect it's best to take people as one finds them—don't you think so? and not keep on tapping them to see if they sound hollow? They've an odd tendency, somehow, to be to you what you believe them to be—at least, that's what the wise folk tell one, and on the whole I've found it true, and *you* will, too.'

'Shall I?' asked Alethea, with a long, wistful look at her companion that went straight into her sympathetic heart. 'I wish I could be quite, *quite*

sure of that.' And then she caught herself up, with a long breath that was not far off a sob. Her companion, with ready tact, hastened to start another subject, and the two girls were chattering merrily together when Lady Elliston's voice broke in—'My dear child, you look quite radiant, and I know you are in very good company,'—this with a polite look at Alethea's companion, to which the latter hardly responded with equal politeness,—'but I'm afraid I really *must* tear you away, for the carriage has been waiting so long.'

Alethea departed with her head full of that girl with the bright eyes and merry face, and carrying with her a sense—strong though undefined—that the world wasn't such a bad place after all, and that there were still some kind, friendly, and unformidable folk in it.

She came down to dinner looking happier than she had done for days; and when Constance asked her, in a rather supercilious tone, whether Mrs. Lytcham's had been a good party, she answered, with radiant eyes, 'Oh, I don't know about that, but it seemed very pleasant to me, because I met such a nice girl there—I think the very nicest girl I ever met in my life!'

'Dear me! What was this paragon's name?'

asked Constance, amused. 'I wonder whether I know her.'

'It was Eleanor Wilson, my dear,' put in Lady Elliston, pausing between two spoonfuls of soup.

'Oh, Eleanor Wilson, was it?' responded Constance. 'Well, that doesn't say so much for your discrimination, Alethea, for she's a kind of duchess, among girls—a *persona grata* with everybody who knows her.'

'*Everybody*, Con?' struck in Frank. 'It is a case of present company excepted, isn't it? I remember you and she used to fight like pussy-cats over which should choose the games, in old days in the Square; and I think I have heard of feuds at committees in more recent times, haven't I?'

'Well, it may be so,' answered Constance, laughing. 'I own I never did hit it off with her, and never shall. I always feel that she gives herself airs, and assumes, as a matter of course, that she is to have the last word about everything. And she can be very overbearing.'

'Two of a trade,' said Frank slyly. 'Never mind, Alethea; Constance wasn't born to appreciate Nell Wilson, but she's a first-rate creature, and has got a heart to match her head—which is saying a good deal, for she's as clever as they


make them !—and I honour your taste for finding out her merits.'

'You are very kind to Eleanor,' said Constance sharply; 'but I should have thought the merit lay rather the other way. It was a question of her discovering Alethea, not Alethea her, I should imagine.'

'Oh, "a cat may look at a king,"' answered Frank, with rather a vexed laugh; and then the talk drifted away to other subjects, and Eleanor Wilson was not again alluded to. But, all through the evening, glimpses of her charming face kept rising up before little Alethea's mental vision; and the sense that here was one who might teach her to see the perplexities of life truly, and be 'a help for days that are unkind,' was as a pillow to rest her soul upon, when she lay down to sleep at night.

CHAPTER VI

NEW LIGHT

LETHEA MORDAUNT was standing alone by the fire in the drawing-room at Chester Square. The light from a tall lamp, planted near the fireplace, shone down on her, and lighted up the coils of bright hair adorning the small head set so gracefully on the slim young neck. Alethea was in white—in a very pretty ball-dress of white satin, which was another of Lady Elliston's gifts—and there were flowers in her hair and long white gloves on her slender arms. Her dress was more festive than her face, which wore a grave, wistful look, out of keeping with her shining attire. Her thoughts were evidently busy about something far away from herself and the coming party. She kept tapping one foot on the fender, regardless of its white satin shoe, and now and then her shoulders rose and fell under a heavy sigh.

Several weeks had now passed since Alethea's coming to Chester Square; Christmas was over and the New Year had begun. The length of her visit had never been defined, but it had always been understood that it was to be a good long one; and as it had turned out that she and Lady Elliston got on so well together, the latter was loth to lose her young companion, and made one excuse and another for prolonging her visit. Alethea was having singing and riding lessons, and of course she could not leave London until these were finished; so the weeks slipped away, and the girl began to wonder whether she were ever going home at all.

The time had been when she would have wished for nothing better than to stay on and on in this pleasant house, where there was so much that was attractive, and where—above all—Frank had his dwelling. But somehow, latterly, things had not been quite so easy, even in Chester Square—life had grown to feel more complicated and difficult—people were perplexing and hard to deal with, and Constance's patronising instructions were galling to flesh and blood—even such simple flesh and blood as her own. Alethea often felt oppressed and uncomfortable, without exactly knowing why; and she had lately begun to long, sometimes, to leave

London behind her—to get back to the simple life at home, and be a child again among the other children.

‘What a baby I was when Frank put this ring on my finger!’ thought the girl to herself, as she held up her hand to let the lamplight catch and sparkle on the diamonds of her engagement ring. ‘Everything seemed so simple then—I didn’t know there were half the puzzles in the world that I do now. I thought everybody meant what they said, and that everything was plain and straightforward. But I know now that people aren’t a bit like that. I don’t think even Frank always tells me everything—at least, I can’t help *fancying* there are things he cares about and does that I know nothing of, and that he doesn’t *want* me to know. Why can’t he trust me?—And then Connie—*how* she does lecture me and tell me the way to do things! She makes me a thousand times more stupid than I am by nature. *Didn’t* she scold me last night, when we were coming home from that party, because I couldn’t find anything to talk about to that fatuous young man she introduced me to! *He* ought to have talked to *me*, of course—Frank says it’s always the man’s business to make conversation—but he couldn’t utter a word beyond, “Aw—exactly so!” How Connie discovered I can’t

think that we weren't getting on, for she had her back turned and there was a sea of people between her and me—but I believe she's got eyes and ears all round her head—she seems able to keep them on me whichever way she turns! If she only *would* let me alone!—And then, I don't know how it is, I'm sure, but she does take the shine out of things so! She likes such queer poetry and such horrid books, and she sniffs at the kind of stories I like, and makes me feel such an idiot for not caring to read the other sorts. And then she doesn't seem to believe in anybody's being good or doing fine things except for what they can get for them! She makes everybody look so *small*!—Now Eleanor Wilson isn't a bit like that—dear, dear Eleanor, how I do love her! Why, the very sight of her makes me feel braver and more cheerful. I don't know what the difference is, for I'm sure she's *quite* as clever as Constance, but she always seems to see the *good* side of people—or if she can't see *that*, she sees their funny side! She doesn't run people down and pick holes in everything they do. And she's so keen about all she does, and finds life so interesting and full of wonderful, lovely things. And she *does* believe in men's being unselfish and doing noble, brave things, just because they *love* doing them, and not merely

for show or reward. Perhaps it's because she's got such jolly brothers of her own— Oh dear! oh dear! I didn't mean *that*'—

Alethea's meditations came to a dead stop; for she saw the force of the inference she had involuntarily been drawing, and halted in dismay. 'Frank is so good to me, and so dear—he's always giving me pretty things—just look at those lovely flowers he told the shop to send me for to-night! Still, I sometimes wish'—Alethea's thoughts wandered off into a formless maze, and something brought the tears to her eyes. She was roused by the sound of the gong and the entrance of Constance.

Constance was not in ball-going attire, for she had given up dancing as too youthful a pursuit, though of other parties she went to a good many. She swept across to the fire and looked Alethea over with a critical eye. 'Cousins has done your hair very well this time,' she remarked; 'and your frock does mother credit. But what's the matter with you?—are you tired, or have you got a headache, that you look so woe-begone?'

Alethea pulled herself together and tried to wink away her tears. 'I—don't like going without Frank,' she said, with an unmistakable quiver in her voice.

'Oh, come,' answered Constance, 'Frank has been

an exemplary lover, I'm sure, and has gone with you to almost every party there has been. You can't expect *always* to have him dancing attendance—men won't stand too much of that kind of thing, and I am sure one can't blame them! And he was obliged to go to Ashenden, you know, for the election meetings, and to interview the tenant who wants to take that farm. You ought to be thankful that he is attending to his business in such an exemplary manner, you little goose!'

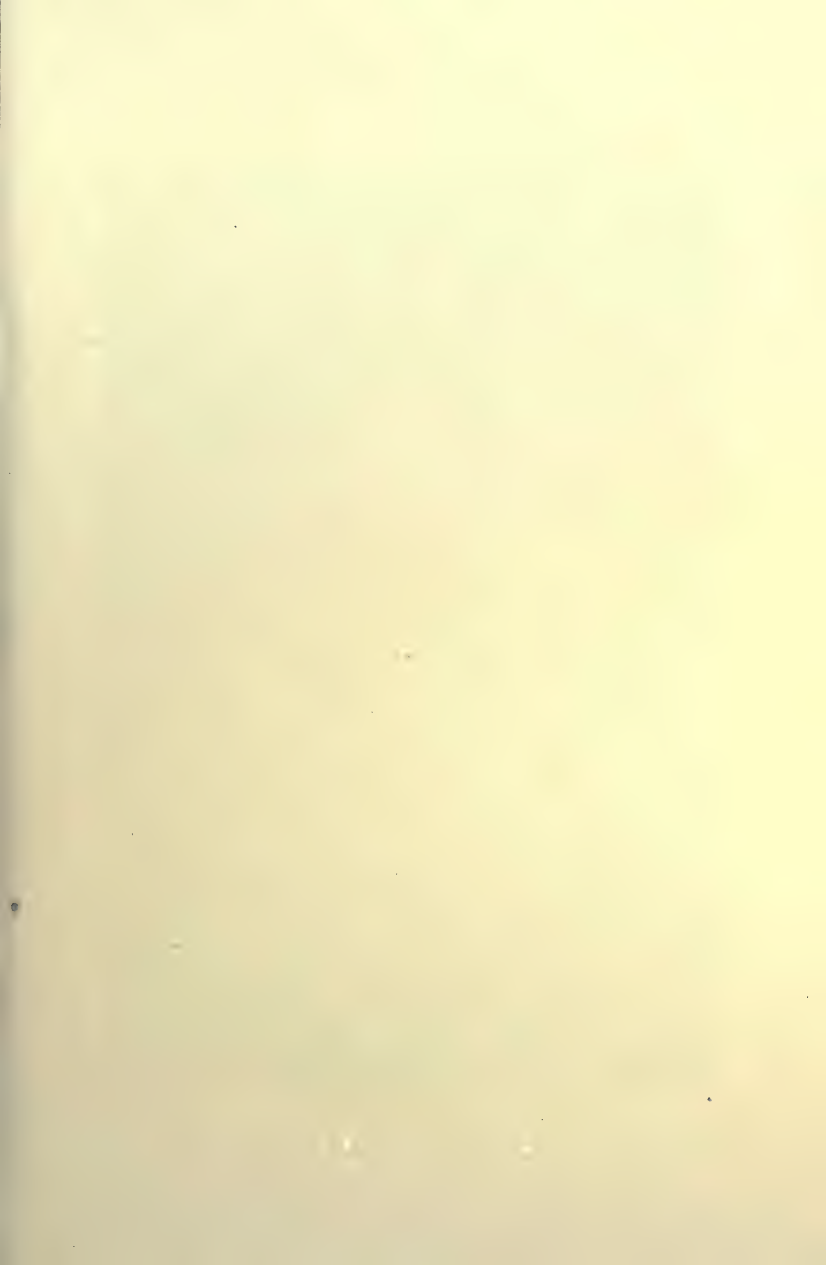
Alethea hated being called a 'little goose'—or, indeed, a 'little' anything—by Constance; but, besides that cause of irritation, there was, again, that note of suggestion about Frank and his ways which never failed to make her vaguely uncomfortable. She was, however, too much afraid of her companion to show her feelings, except by receiving her remarks in silence; and at that moment the appearance of Lady Elliston and the announcement of dinner made a welcome diversion.

Lady Elliston would have dearly enjoyed taking Alethea to her balls, but she was forbidden by her doctor to go out in the evening during the winter months, so it had been arranged that a friend of the Ellistons was to escort her young lady to the dance, with her own girls. Accordingly, at half-past nine, Alethea, in her white gown, was driven

away in the carriage to Eaton Square, in solitary state. Very shy she felt, and rather heavy-hearted, and not very willing to go. It was rather terrifying work going out alone in this way, without either of the Ellistons, to quite a strange house and under the escort of strange people. Not even Constance's parting assurance that she would be sure to meet her dear Eleanor Wilson at Mrs. Bute's could conjure the frightened look out of Alethea's eyes.

The clock on the church in Chester Square had just struck midnight, clanging out upon the now silent air with insistent strokes, and Constance had laid down her pen and was thinking she would go to bed, when the sound of a four-wheeled cab rattling along the Square caught her ear. The silence of London at night, in its less frequented thoroughfares, is almost as portentous as its clamour by day. When a noise does make itself heard, it strikes with double loudness on the ear, because it springs out of a setting of silence which we cannot but realise intensely.

Constance could not help listening, half unconsciously, to the noise made by the rattling vehicle upon the frost-bound road, although her attention was still busy over the task on which she had been





engaged. When, however, the cab slackened its pace in front of their own house, and the front-door bell was heard to ring, she was roused to listen with full attentiveness.

‘Why, that must be Alethea,’ she thought to herself; ‘but what can have brought her home so early—and in a cab, too? That certainly is not the carriage. I had better go and see.’ She had not, however, taken many steps downstairs before a light made itself visible mounting from below, and the sound of a dress swishing against the banisters could be heard, as if its wearer were coming upstairs at a hasty, irregular pace.

Another moment and Alethea came round the turn of the staircase, with her opera-cloak dropping off her shoulders and a bedroom candlestick held all aslope in her hand. Her panting breath could be distinctly heard as she mounted, and she kept clutching at the banisters to steady her trembling steps. Constance caught sight of her face in the gleam of the candle, and was startled at its whiteness.

‘Why, Alethea,’ she cried — though in hushed tones, for her mother’s room was not far off — ‘what *is* the matter? Are you ill, that you have come home so early?’

Alethea, who expected to see no one, and whose

one idea was to gain the shelter of her own room, was startled, by this apparition, out of the small remnant of her composure. She dropped the candlestick and sank against the banisters, drawing in her breath with a long sob that sounded through the silent house like the wail of a ghost.

Constance, really frightened, flew down to catch her, and, by the help of her strong arm and the banisters, got the half-fainting girl upstairs as far as the drawing-room and put her on the sofa. Miss Elliston was a person who rather enjoyed small emergencies; she opened the window and fetched some water, and soon brought Alethea round from the helpless, gasping state in which she had laid her down.

‘Keep still; you will soon be all right again,’ she said, in a brisk, business-like voice, which in itself was a stimulant. ‘I suppose you found the room too hot, and got a little upset by it.’

‘No, it wasn’t that,’ murmured Alethea, as well as her stiff, cold lips would let her. And then she drew another long, shuddering breath, and, to her companion’s surprise, burst into such a passion of crying as Constance had seldom or never before witnessed. The poor child turned her face away, and hid it in her trembling hands, but otherwise conceal her grief she could not—her tears streamed

down like rain, and she was shaken from head to foot by a tempest of sobs.

Constance tried first petting and then scolding, but neither was of much avail. Alethea cried on till she could cry no longer, and the violence of her grief spent itself by dint of sheer exhaustion. She looked up at last, with a tremulous smile, at Constance, and whispered an apology for 'behaving in such a babyish way.' Her companion brought some sal-volatile and made her drink it, and presently a faint colour began to creep back into her cheeks. She pulled herself up on the sofa, and said she was better now, and would go to bed.

'Keep quiet a few minutes longer — you are a poor shaky little thing still,' said Constance, pushing her down again not unkindly. 'Lie still, and tell me what all this is about. What was it that upset you so much?'

Alethea quivered, and made no answer. It was a question she dreaded, and wanted, if possible, to evade, but there was not much hope of doing that, with Constance standing, square and straight, at the foot of the sofa and looking down at her with those forceful dark eyes.

'Tell me what you have been crying about,' she repeated insistently.

‘I—I don’t want to talk about it, please.’ Alethea looked pleading and miserable, but to no avail.

‘Ah, but *I* want to hear. I represent an elder sister, you know, and I think you ought to tell me.’

Poor Alethea palpitated and blushed. She squeezed her hands together and looked desperately into the dark corners of the room, as if seeking somewhere to hide herself from those searching eyes. But there was no escaping, and she spoke at last, so low that Constance could scarcely hear her. ‘I’ve heard that—that Frank is a fast man,’ she breathed, hanging her head as if it were her own bad ways to which she was confessing.

Constance caught her breath and flushed as hotly as Alethea had done. She looked first angry, and then inclined to laugh. ‘Well, I didn’t think’—she cried vehemently, then caught herself up, and went on in a milder tone, ‘You poor child! What an unpleasant thing for you to hear! Who in the world gave you this piece of information?’

Alethea writhed and hid her face. ‘It’s *true*, then?’ she whispered, from between her trembling fingers.

‘*True?*’ echoed Constance, with a scornful

laugh. 'Frank's a far better fellow than— But we'll talk of that afterwards. Tell me first how on earth you came to let anyone say so rude a thing to you?'

Alethea uncovered her face, and made a great effort to master herself and speak quietly. 'It wasn't said to *me*,' she explained, 'but it happened at Mrs. Bute's. I had been dancing, and then my partner took me into the conservatory, and we sat on a sofa there, and he said how short of men Mrs. Bute seemed to be—I suppose it was for something to say—and he couldn't think where they had all disappeared to. And then he mentioned two or three people's names that he seemed to expect me to know, and among them he said, "And there's Elliston—but *he* wouldn't feel much inclined for dancing, perhaps, just now." And so I said, "Why not?" And he said, "Oh, well, he's been pretty hard hit just lately, don't you know!—only perhaps it's rather telling tales out of school! Do you know him?" And then of course I was going to say "Yes," but he was that kind of person who is always asking questions and never stopping to hear the answers, and before I could get a word out he had begun upon something quite different—about whether I had seen some play or other, I think it was. What *did* he

mean, Constance, about being "hard hit," and about telling tales? What has Frank been doing? Oh, I *must* understand—I must, indeed!’

‘Vulgar cad!’ cried Constance, with a dangerous glitter in her eyes. ‘I should like to know who he was! What was he like?’

‘Oh, I don’t know—like hundreds of others! Men are all just alike at a dance, it seems to me,’ answered Alethea wearily. ‘But the thing I want to know is, what did he mean about Frank? *Please* tell me, Connie.’

‘Oh—you had better ask Frank himself, if you want to know,’ returned Constance, with an uneasy laugh. ‘It is—oh, just nothing at all—only what all the young men do who have a little money to muddle away! It meant that he has been losing a few small bets on the turf.’

‘On the turf?—on race-horses? Oh, *Constance!*’ The blood ebbed away again from Alethea’s cheeks, leaving her as white as her satin gown. ‘Father thinks all betting dreadfully wrong,’ she said, after a distressful pause. ‘He once caught Rupert betting with one of our drummer-boys, and he gave him a beating for it. And yet it was only a halfpenny!’

Constance burst out laughing. ‘Well—I wish he may never catch Rupert doing anything more

dreadful,' she cried. 'Really, Alethea,—though I don't want to be impertinent,—that *was* a little strait-laced of the colonel. I'll be bound he betted himself when he was a boy. And as to Frank's betting—he's a man of means, you see, and can afford to do as he pleases. And you really should realise how inexperienced you are, and not set up to judge people as if you knew what was right and wrong about everything. Don't be such a goose!'

Alethea fixed her great innocent eyes upon the speaker's face, with a world of anxious questioning in them. 'Aren't right and wrong the same everywhere?' she asked piteously. 'Isn't betting wrong in itself, whether the amounts are small or large?'

Constance only shrugged her shoulders. 'Wait till you are a little older, my good child,' she answered oracularly; and the blank look on Alethea's face grew yet more blank.

'But that wasn't the *only* thing I heard,' the girl continued, breaking an uncomfortable silence, during which her companion had been casting about for something judicious to say. 'It was very dreadful, I know, to—to overhear things, as if I were listening on purpose—though *indeed* I wasn't. But it happened like this. While we were sitting there, and my partner was prating

away about that new play that Frank admires so much, two men came and sat down on another sofa, back to back with ours—only with a lot of tall plants between, you know, so that they couldn't see us. And one of them said to the other, in such a loud voice—I couldn't help hearing every word'— Alethea's voice died away in a sob, and she hid her face in the sofa-cushion.

'Well?' said Constance, trying to laugh, but inwardly feeling very uneasy. 'And what dreadful thing did *he* say of poor unlucky Frank? Out with it, you silly child! You will feel better when it is told!'

'He said, "What do you think I've heard to-day at the club?—that that gay chap Elliston has gone and engaged himself to a little bread-and-butter miss hardly out of the schoolroom. I don't know how to believe it." And the other man said, "I suppose it's true, for I saw it in the *World*. He'll have to mend his ways a bit, if he's going to settle down into a married man."—Oh, it was *dreadful*!'

'And you mean to say,' cried Constance, 'that you sat calmly there, and let these horrid things be said of the man you are engaged to, without a word? And yet you say you love him! Really I don't know how to believe that you care two straws about him!'

‘Connie, how can you—how *dare* you say such a thing? I care more for Frank than for all the rest of the world put together! But I didn’t know *what* to say or do, after not making my partner understand, before, that I knew Frank—it made it so dreadfully awkward. And besides, how *could* one tell that they were going to talk about *him*, of all people in the world? And it was all said in a flash, before one had time to move, or even to think what to do. All I could think of was to try and look as if I hadn’t heard anything, but it just took my breath away, and the room went spinning round—oh! I never, never in my life had such an awful moment!’

The poor child crouched into the corner of the sofa, hiding her now burning face in her hands. Constance could see the blushes mounting to the very roots of her hair, and a sharp spasm of pity caught at her throat as she looked.

‘—But I don’t think I hid it very well’—(‘No, I should rather expect *not*,’ said Constance to herself. ‘She’s the most transparent little goose I ever beheld!’)—‘for when I dared look at my partner again I saw such an odd expression in his eyes, and he had grown very red, and was muttering something under his breath; and he jumped up and gave me his arm and said, “Shall

I take you back to Mrs. Mainwaring?" And so he did.'

'Well, but why did you come home in this precipitate way?' pursued Constance. 'You had much better have stayed and danced it off, my dear child.'

Alethea gave her another of those reproachful looks. 'If I *didn't* care about Frank—as you say I don't, Connie—I might perhaps have stopped on,' she said simply. 'But as it was— And besides, I felt so ill. When I got back into the dancing-room—oh! it was like a furnace, and the twirling people made me so giddy, and the air seemed to rush over me like a hot wave. I thought I was going to faint, and I think I should have tumbled down, if there hadn't been my partner's arm to hold on to. I suppose I gripped it very tight, and that made him notice that I looked bad. I thought him horrid before, but he was very kind then,—he got me through the crowd of people so quickly, and put me on a chair outside the door, and said he would fetch Mrs. Mainwaring to me. And when she came I told her I didn't feel well, and wanted to go home. And she seemed rather put out, and said she really didn't know how to come away yet—her girls would be so cross, for they had only just

begun dancing. But my man said she might let me go home by myself in a cab—it was so close by—he was sure Lady Elliston wouldn't mind. I *did* feel grateful to him! And he took me downstairs, and found my cloak for me and put me into a cab; and when it was driving off he popped his head in at the window, and said in a great hurry, "I'm afraid I was an ass just now—but you'll forgive me, I hope?" But oh! Connie, what does it all mean? *Isn't* Frank what I think him? How has anybody got the right to say such dreadful things about him? It isn't true, is it, that he is—what they called him? Oh, do *please* say it isn't!

Alethea was sitting up now, in a heap, on the great crimson sofa, with her hands clasped together round her knees. Her shimmering satin folds were billowing about her, enhancing the paleness of her face and giving her a strange, almost ghostly look. Her hair had fallen loose, and was hanging in heavy, forlorn tresses on her neck. Out of her white face her eyes gleamed up at Constance, with a questioning anxiety in them and a frightened look like that of a hunted fawn.

The other felt half angry with her and half pitiful. She was so young and simple—so

ridiculously inexperienced—so unfit to cope with the ways of doing and thinking of a wicked world! It surely would not be difficult to reduce so small and solitary a rebel to order—to make her yield up her crude ideas of right and wrong and accept that statement of facts which her elders and betters thought fit to offer her! She must learn to take things on trust, and to make the best of life as she might chance to find it; to be content with second best in one sphere—albeit the main sphere—of her life, and be thankful that it was as good as it was. Constance studied her in grim, deliberate silence, while she considered how best to set about bringing this aspect of matters home to her, and how to make her grasp the necessity of accepting it.

‘People mean such different things by that horrid word *fast*,’ she said at length, speaking with a measured easiness of tone that acted instinctively as a moderator of Alethea’s feverish excitement. ‘My mother, for example, calls a girl fast if she merely talks slang; while with some people, on the other hand, it means that the unlucky wight so called is—well about as bad as he or she can be. I’ve noticed that that is always the sense the word conveys to—well, to people who haven’t been much in the world, and

who have got a way of their own of looking at things, different from that of people who are more in society. And—I beg your pardon, Alethea, but I rather think that's *your* way. Some nice kind person—whom you know nothing about—calls your future husband a fast man, and you immediately run away with the notion that he's a villain of the deepest dye. All your knowledge of him—for I *suppose* you know him pretty well by this time?'—(there was a touch of sarcasm in Constance's 'suppose' that would have driven one who understood it wild with anger; but the shaft was lost on Alethea's ingenuousness)—'goes for nothing, and you condemn him, on the spot, as if he were no more to you than an ordinary acquaintance. Upon my word, I think I have some excuse for calling you cold-blooded!'

Alethea sighed piteously, and looked more than ever perplexed. 'I don't think you understand,' she said doubtfully. '*I* haven't condemned Frank—indeed, how could I, when I've always found him so good and kind? But I'm sure it—it isn't—*good* to be fast; and I want you to tell me the truth about it, Connie—*dear* Connie. *Is* Frank fast, as those men called him? Do please tell me, Yes or No.'

Constance, with a sense of cynical amusement,

felt herself a kind of Queen Eleanor, offering that grim choice of dagger or bowl to Fair Rosamond, kneeling before her. 'If by fast you mean what's really very bad—what a *gentleman* couldn't be,' she said deliberately—'I say No, most emphatically. But if by fast you mean—well, such little ways as every young man indulges in, I'm not going to make Frank out as better than his kind. He has got his weaknesses, like everybody else.'

'I wish I knew what you mean by "little ways,"' answered Alethea, in a quivering voice. 'You won't speak out straight, and I can only guess that they are things which nice girls can't know anything about. But I don't believe it's true that all young men have such ways. I'm sure my father never had. He never did anything to be ashamed of.'

'Perhaps not,' remarked Constance drily. Her tone implied that what might have been looked for in Colonel Mordaunt was not by any means to be expected of Frank Elliston.

—'He has always been as good as gold; and I want my—my husband to be just like him.'

'Perhaps you do. I suppose every girl sighs after perfection in her husband—after the impossible, that is—and then finds, at last, that she has to put up with something a great deal short

of it. You had much better begin at once to take things as they really are, Alethea ; it will save you disappointment and unhappiness in the long-run. It's one of the penalties of growing up, that we have to let go our illusions.'

Alethea shook her head. 'I don't expect Frank to be perfection, Connie,—I'm not so silly as all *that* ! I know he gets cross over little things—he has told me so himself—and I shouldn't be surprised if he is selfish sometimes—all men are, mother says. It isn't *that* kind of thing I mind about, but—but—oh, Constance, I can't say it, but you know what I mean !' And Alethea, all one burning blush, hid her face once more in the sofa-cushion.

'Upon my word, Alethea,' cried Constance, 'you *do* suspect evil of poor Frank ! I only wish there were nobody worse than he. One would think, to hear you talk, that he was a regular black sheep. As I tell you, he has lost a little money on races, and has won a little too, and he belongs to some rather fast clubs, and likes some amusement out of working hours ; but that is the very utmost that his bitterest enemy could say about him. If you knew a little more of the ways of the world, you would understand what these things mean, and be heartily thankful to have won the love of such a

good fellow as Frank. It's your—well, it's hardly polite, I know, to say this, but you must forgive me—it's your ignorance that makes you see things in such a bad light, and imagine all sorts of detestable misconduct that Frank is not guilty of, nor ever has been.'

Even the gentle Alethea could not but flush up at this speech, and an angry light sprang into her eyes; but there was a masterfulness about Constance and an intensity of will which acted almost like a spell, and which she felt helpless to resist. Her eyes quailed and fell beneath that dark pair, with their steady ironical gaze.

Constance went on, in a tone meant to be kind, but which only succeeded in being patronising, 'Now look here, you silly child, you have got over-strained and over-tired, and don't see things in their proper proportions. And it's one o'clock in the morning, which is not at all the time for discussing moral questions. Come upstairs, and I'll help you out of your frock, and you shall tumble into bed and go to sleep as quickly as possible; and—you will see—things will look very different in the morning. Come along with you!'

'I suppose I *must* go to bed,' replied Alethea, getting up wearily off the sofa and shaking out her

crumpled plumes, 'and not keep you up like this. But I shall never go to sleep—I know I shan't. For you have not *satisfied* me, Constance,—I don't feel I really and truly understand.'

'*Understand?*' echoed her companion, some of her secret contempt showing itself, at length, in her voice. 'Oh, what a *fool* you are, Alethea! Can't you be content to believe yourself what you *are*—the luckiest girl in London? You can do anything with Frank, if you only go the right way to work; and he'll make you the kindest of husbands, and let you have as good a time as heart could wish. Isn't that enough to satisfy any sensible being?'

But Alethea only shook her head and crept away to bed, a most dishevelled and dejected maiden.

CHAPTER VII

‘YOU WON’T GIVE HIM UP?’

IT was hardly surprising that, next morning, Alethea woke with so bad a headache that it was impossible for her to do anything but lie still in her bed. Constance’s maid brought in her breakfast, with a message from her mistress that ‘Miss Mordaunt was on no account to get up until Miss Elliston came to see how she was’; but the lady herself did not appear. It was the day which she gave, weekly, to working on a charitable committee in South London, starting early and returning late; so Alethea knew that she would have to stay where she was till tea-time at the earliest.

Lady Elliston was also in her room that day, having sneezed two or three times the evening before; so the respectful and silent Cousins was Alethea’s sole visitor, and she only appeared at

intervals, and stayed no longer than was needful to see after her charge’s comfort.

During the first hours of the day Alethea’s headache was too severe for her to have thoughts to spare for anything else. She longed, like a baby, for old Nanny, who had been her nurse from the beginning, and to whom she and the whole tribe at home were accustomed to turn in their ailments; but her bodily discomfort was too great to leave her the power of connected thought. The events of the night before hung over her like an oppressive cloud, without her being able to recall what it was that was weighing on her heart like lead.

By the afternoon, however, the pain had spent itself; and after a sound sleep the girl came back to the recollection of what had happened, and knew why she was feeling so miserable. She lay there in the small white bed facing the window, with its view of roofs and chimney-pots, going over and over in her mind the scenes of the previous evening, and wondering what they really meant—those things which had been said of Frank; what she should do, if it were actually the fact that he was not ‘good,’ and how she should come at the truth.

The longer she lay the more distressed she grew. She tried to read, but the short winter afternoon

was already waning, and the effort to decipher small print in a bad light made her head ache again, so she was forced to give up that attempt to divert her thoughts. Tears of utter wretchedness were running down her cheeks when the sound of steps approaching her door roused her to dash them hastily away, and try to look as usual. Cousins appeared with a message—‘Miss Wilson’s love, and would Miss Mordaunt care to see her for five minutes?’

‘Oh yes, indeed I should!’ cried Alethea eagerly, with brightening eyes. A light, active step was soon to be heard mounting the stairs behind Cousins’ staid footfall, and Eleanor Wilson appeared in the doorway, her cheeks pink with exercise and her eyes bright with that merry graciousness which was one of her greatest charms. Alethea, in the flush of her enthusiasm for this new friend, had told Frank she was like a piece of sweetbriar; and he had laughed, and agreed that the comparison was no bad one. Her charming, fresh face had the tender pinkness and whiteness of a briar rose; and there was a sturdiness about her sweetness and a strength of fibre in her gay and wholesome nature which had a subtle akinness to the homely fragrant favourite of cottage gardens.

Like the sweetbriar, too, Eleanor had her thorns, but they were purely thorns of defence—defence of others more than of herself—and had no sort of aggressiveness about them. The native shrewdness and power of observation which gave her so keen an insight into the minds and characters of others, and made her quick to recognise their absurdities and inconsistencies, were so tempered with love and tender-heartedness as never to make her unmerciful or severe. Her inborn sense of humour and love of fun were held in check by a great fund of reverence, which lay deep down in her sweet and joyous nature, kept her from triviality and shallowness, and sanctified and uplifted all her dealings, both with God and man. She had a deep passion for her kind—an intensity of reverent love for all with whom her many-sided life brought her in contact—for her parents, for the brothers and sister who made up her happy home life, for the many friends for whom her heart had room, for the tiresome, wilful, affectionate working girls with whom her work in a poor neighbourhood brought her into close relationship. Surely a nature born to help and bless—a ‘light shining in a dark place,’ to show to those around it how joyous and attractive a Christian’s life can be.

To poor little Alethea, in the bewilderment of her new trouble, the very sight of Eleanor brought comfort and cheering. Though she might not speak of what was weighing on her spirit, the sense of fellowship and sympathy came to her warm and strong.

‘Oh, Eleanor!’ she cried, with a hard struggle to keep the quiver out of her voice, ‘what made you come just when I wanted somebody so badly?’ And she threw her arms round her friend’s neck and clung to her as if she could never let go.

It was Eleanor who loosened her arms, with those strong yet gentle fingers, and took a long look at her face, with eyes at once tender and keen. ‘You poor child, what are you doing here, all by yourself? Is this the result of too much dancing, or of what other dissipation?’

‘Oh *no*, it isn’t dissipation, indeed, but I had a headache this morning—I can’t tell you what brought it on—and Constance said I was to stay in bed till she came home. I do wish she hadn’t settled it without even seeing me! I’ve been so miserable lying here all alone.’

‘And your misery has been finding an outlet in tears, hasn’t it?’ asked Eleanor, with one of her bright, searching looks.

'Ye—es, I *have* been crying a little.' Alethea owned to it rather unwillingly.

Eleanor sat down on the bed. 'Wouldn't you like to tell me what it was about?' she asked, throwing her head back and regarding Alethea with so merry a look of friendly curiosity that, in spite of her heavy heart, the latter could hardly keep from laughing.

'Oh, I *should*—like to, but I can't! It's—it's all so puzzling and—and dreadful—and I've no right, perhaps—oh, don't ask me, Eleanor, *please* don't'— The colour had rushed into Alethea's white cheeks, and she was twisting her fingers nervously together and looking up at her companion with a face of miserable perplexity. Eleanor laid her hands on the small quivering fingers and drew them into her strong grasp. There was comfort in their very touch. 'There, now, don't look like that,' she said. 'I deserve to be put in the corner by Becky, as she used to do when I was a small child and *would* ask her questions she couldn't answer! See, Alethea—we don't need always to *tell* things in order to get close to each other about them, do we? I think there's so much we can understand without a word being said.'

Alethea's great hazel eyes gazed up at Eleanor,

shining through her tears. 'Oh, I *feel* as if you understood,' she said, 'though I can't *tell* you. I wonder what teaches you to be so—so comprehending? It makes one feel as if the very touch of you were a help! I think you must have been born with eyes that see farther into people's hearts than the rest of us can do.'

Eleanor laughed and shook her head. 'Oh, I don't see far into people, as you call it. If you only knew the mistakes I've made and the ghastly muddles I've got into! But I possess a mother who really *is* a sort of white witch, I always tell her, and who has the gift of understanding people's difficulties and of "helping lame dogs over stiles," if ever anyone had. And she has taught me to see a little how interesting one's fellow-creatures are, and what a queer, funny, fascinating thing human character is.' Eleanor sat silent a moment, with her hand in Alethea's, and then began to talk about her Sunday class of factory girls, and describe some of its members and their histories in such an amusing, original fashion, that for ten minutes Alethea forgot herself and her troubles, and laughed as heartily over Susie Walker's three young men at once and Jane Adams' Bank Holiday adventures as if she had had nothing weighing on her mind. But when Eleanor jumped up and

said she must go—she had promised by all her gods to be in at tea-time, as a prosy old cousin was coming who was apt to overwhelm her mother with talk—the miserable, beseeching look came back into the poor child's eyes, and the quivering into her white lips.

'Eleanor,' she said suddenly, seizing the other's hand in both her own, 'oh, Eleanor, stop a minute! I want'— She caught herself up and looked away, as if it were impossible to say what it was she wanted. Eleanor Wilson stood still and let her hand rest in that quivering grasp. She wondered what Alethea's trouble could be; but, though ignorant of the cause of her unhappiness, all her heart went out in pity for this forlorn, trembling child.

Alethea at last spoke again, almost under her breath. 'Eleanor,' she whispered, '—perhaps I oughtn't to ask you, but I've no one else—oh, Eleanor, *did* you ever hear—do you think people have any right to say that—that Frank is a fast man?'

There was a pause. Outside, in the mews below, a woman was crying fruit, and the sound of her shrill voice, shrieking 'Oranges, sweet oranges,' rose up through the foggy twilight with clamorous insistence, and seemed to fill the room.

Eleanor's grasp tightened on those trembling fingers, while her quick brain considered what would be the best thing to say. It would be so easy—without direct untruthfulness—to satisfy this simple creature and hush her fears to rest; but would it be right? Would it even, in the long-run, be kind? Eleanor weighed the question, and tried to see her way clear. Then she said gently, 'I *have* heard him called that—but it was some years ago. Many men are idle and unsatisfactory for a bit, and settle down all right. But why do you ask me? Surely you *know*, by now, Alethea, for your own self, what sort of man he is?'

'Ah, but that is just what I don't believe I *do*,' replied Alethea mournfully. 'Constance says—But there, I don't believe I ought to speak of it at all.' At that moment the rattling of a tray outside the door announced the coming of Cousins with Alethea's afternoon tea, and Eleanor, with another long kiss, was obliged to leave her and make the best of her way home to Chester Street.

She was haunted, as she sped along the Square, by the remembrance of those lovely eyes, which had followed her to the door with a look almost tragic in its forlorn anxiety. Few girls, perhaps,

knew more of the inner workings of others' lives than did this one, or bore the burden of more hidden difficulties and troubles of other people. There was something in her face that made sad people want to open their hearts to her, as well as that which made happy people eager that she should increase their joys by sharing them. Eleanor Wilson took all alike into her capacious, kindly heart. She knew when to be grave and sympathetic, and when a touch of friendly chaff was the best medicine. At the present moment her hands were full to overflowing of plans and interests, and there were schemes afoot, whereof she was the moving spirit, which demanded her best wisdom and most thoughtful consideration. But she found time, among all her other claims, to think long and steadily of this girl, whom mere accident — if there be such a thing as accident in the crossing and touching one another of human lives—had thrown in her way, though without gaining much conscious light on the best method of helping her in her difficulties.

'She seems terribly in awe of Constance, poor little soul!' thought Eleanor, as she opened her own door with her latch-key and hastened in. 'I wonder whether *she* has anything to do with this—whether she is coercing Alethea in any

way? And what can the child have heard about that Frank of hers? I know Rupert and Ted used to fight very shy of him in Oxford days, and afterwards; but one would suppose he was different now. It must be horrible to see your idol going to pieces—oh, I *am* sorry for her! If she wants advice, it's her mother who ought to help her, as her father is such a long way off; but somehow Alethea doesn't seem to look to her mother, or turn to her for advice. Well, there's nothing for *me* to do, so far as I can perceive; but I must try and see her as often as I can, and at least let her feel there's somebody who cares.'

Alethea was persuaded that Constance was keeping her a prisoner in bed in order to have another talk about the subject of the night before; and she lay expecting her return in an agony of nervous apprehension. She felt herself even more helpless and at the other's mercy, lying horizontal in bed, than if she were upright and in her clothes, like the rest of the world.

When Constance at length appeared, however, it was only to ask after the headache, and to invite Alethea downstairs if she felt inclined to get up. When the girl appeared, looking wan

and heavy-eyed, Constance tucked her up comfortably on the sofa by the fire, talked pleasantly about nothing in particular, and seemed only desirous to treat her young companion exactly as usual. The sole reference that she made to Frank was to inquire whether Alethea had written to him that day, and when the girl answered hesitatingly, 'No, I—couldn't,' made no comment on the matter.

On the following morning Alethea was sitting alone in one of the drawing-room windows with her embroidery in her hands. Her needle was busy, but it was plain that her thoughts were both far away, and by no means happily employed. Every now and then she stopped and let her hands sink idly in her lap, while she gazed out into the network of leafless boughs which filled the nearer view, as if asking counsel of the comfortless, grimy branches.

She did not hear Constance enter the room, and gave a great start when the now familiar voice made itself heard behind her.

'Really, my dear child,' the voice said, 'one would think you and Frank had had a serious quarrel, to say the least of it! It is quite time you left off looking so woe-begone, or people will be thinking there is something the matter. There

is mother asking what ails you—you looked so poorly, she thought, when you went in to see her this morning. Of course I laid it to your headache, so you had better be prepared to be sent for to see Dr. Thompson when he comes to-morrow! I believe, though, as a matter of fact, your headache is quite gone?—so you ought to cheer up and not look so absurdly dejected. It really isn't fair upon Frank, you know, when he is doing all he can to make you happy!'

Alethea had resumed her stitching with nervous energy. She was embroidering the petals of a wild rose, and for ever after could not behold a particular shade of salmon-pink wool without its bringing her a consciousness of vague but intense misery.

'I—I've been thinking about it a great deal, Connie,' she said, without apparently noticing the other's speech, 'and I *know* it too, now, for a positive fact. Frank isn't—what I want him to be. He doesn't look at things in the same way that my father does, for instance.'

Constance seated herself with deliberation in a high-backed chair standing near, and laid her hands on the arms. It brought her into full view of that frightened young face opposite. She felt there

was going to be a struggle, and she meant to conquer.

'You say you *know*—what means have you had of finding out? I should hardly have thought you would go round inquiring what the world thinks of the man you have promised to marry!' There was a note of angry scorn in her voice which woke even the gentle Alethea to defiance.

'How *could* I "go round," as you call it? You *know* I've been in bed all the time! The only person I've seen is Eleanor Wilson.'

Constance shrugged her shoulders. 'Oh, then I conclude it is *she* who has been retailing people's unkind gossip?—I shouldn't have expected her to condescend to anything so unworthy.'

'It was *not* gossip. Eleanor never gossips!' Alethea drew up her slim neck and uttered her brief sentences in dignified accents. Then her lips closed tightly, and she looked as if nothing should induce her to open them again.

Constance deemed it wisest to let the question drop, though inwardly boiling with anger at the 'meddlesomeness' of Eleanor Wilson. 'Of course this little goose takes every word of Eleanor's for gospel—they all do,' she thought to herself.

Alethea's needle went on flying in and out of her work, but each stitch was planted more unsteadily

than the last, and at length she let her hands fall into her lap to conceal their trembling.

‘Connie,’ she said, in a low voice, ‘girls *ought* not to marry men whom they can’t look up to—it is wrong of them to do it, if they feel so about it. I—I want you to let me go home.’

‘To let you go home? What on earth do you mean, child? Why, that would be equivalent to breaking off your engagement!’

Alethea raised her eyes for a minute and fixed them on the face opposite her. ‘Yes,’ she said, almost inaudibly, ‘it would be that. And that’s what I want to do.’

Her frightened eyes saw Constance’s mouth quiver and her whole face contract; but when she spoke it was lightly, and with an attempt at a smile. ‘Alethea, you really are *too* silly,’ she said. ‘Engagements are not like pie-crust—made to be broken for nothing at all! You really are behaving in a most childish way, and don’t seem to realise that there are such things as responsibilities—even for *you*. An engagement is a serious matter.’

‘Yes, I know it is. I quite understand it. You are always making me out such a baby, Constance, but I *do* know what I am talking about. It’s because an engagement *is* such a serious thing that I can’t go on with it, feeling as I do. And

I've written to Frank to ask him to let me go home.'

Constance drew a quick breath of surprise and annoyance. This child was showing a spirit and determination she would never have given her credit for. '*Written to Frank, have you?*' she cried, in a sharp voice. 'Is the letter gone?'

Alethea hesitated. She wished she could have told a fib and said Yes. It might at least bring this torturing process to an end. 'N—no,' she said at last, 'not yet. It is in my pocket.'

'Then you must *not* send it—you must promise me to burn it instead,' replied Constance, in her most authoritative manner. Then, with a sudden change of tone, she leant forward in her chair. 'Look, Alethea,' she said, 'I won't treat you as a child, then, but give you credit for being a woman, with a woman's feelings. Don't you love Frank, and don't you believe he loves you?'

Poor Alethea flushed crimson, and the tears sprang into her eyes. She could not speak; but the mute gesture she made was more eloquent than words.

'Well, then, how could you have the heart to do this? Have you thought at all what it would mean to Frank to get that letter, and know you had thrown him over, on the strength of mere

reports, at hearsay, of which you possess absolutely no proof ?’

‘But they are *true* !’ cried Alethea, with a ring of anguish in her voice. ‘They are *true*. You can’t deny it.’

Constance hesitated a moment. ‘Supposing, then, we admit that he’s *not* quite as good as he ought to be,’ she went on, with an assumption of candour that only further perplexed her hearer, ‘ought that to make any difference as to your giving him up ? It seems to me all the other way. You are—or can be, if you will—the very strongest influence for good in his life. You can lead him, in time, I feel sure, to anything you like, and make whatever you please of him, if you only are tactful and patient. I assure you, Frank is easily led, in spite of his masterful ways. It has been against him all his life. But it can be used for good as well as for harm, don’t you see, Alethea ? You can lead him to good—just as others have, perhaps, led him to harm.’ Constance spoke deliberately, with her eyes fixed on Alethea’s palpitating face. She seemed to wish, having once admitted the fact of her brother’s peccadilloes, to recognise them fully, and to allude to them as if they were a matter of course.

‘I want you to realise what it means,’ she

went on, after a pause—Alethea could say nothing, could not even look at her companion; she kept clasping and unclasping her hands in her lap, and staring with unseeing eyes out of the window—‘what it would mean if you were to throw Frank over. He trusts you and believes in you—because he thinks you are good and true—more than he believes in anything else in the world. If you give him up, it will simply mean this—that he will go to the bad. He won’t believe in goodness any more, if yours is too—too *good* to put up with him because he isn’t perfect. If you throw him over, he will go wrong altogether, and it will be—*your* fault!’

There was an indescribable force and intensity in Constance’s steady, even voice, and in the expression of her dark eyes; though her face never varied from its habitual set paleness, and the firm pose of her hands on the arms of the chair never either tightened or relaxed. Her words fell on Alethea’s heart with the force of actual blows; she quivered and winced under the pain they inflicted.

There was silence for a minute or two. Then Alethea said—with a catch in her voice—‘You are quite mistaken, Constance, about me, and so is Frank, if he really thinks me—what you *say* he does. I’m not good at all—oh, so much the other

way!—and I could never make Frank good, or anybody else. Why, I never even *thought* of influencing anybody—it seems to me a most conceited thing to do, and quite, *quite* beyond my reach!’

Constance looked at her with that thin smile of hers. ‘What, you, the eldest of a large family, have never thought about your powers of influence?’ she asked incredulously.

‘Oh, well—of course I knew I had got to set the little ones an example of being obedient and—and unselfish, and truthful, and so on. But I never thought about influence in the kind of way you mean, Constance. Why, I have only just begun to realise myself what—well, what being good really means: I certainly can’t help anyone else to be good yet—if I *ever* could—oh, *indeed* I can’t!’ Alethea spoke in hurried desperation, revealing more of her inward self to Constance than she would have dreamt of doing under ordinary circumstances, in the hope of convincing her taskmaster that she was not equal to the burden laid upon her.

‘Of course, I know what you mean,’ Constance answered, speaking in a gentler tone. ‘You don’t *feel* good enough—no, happily not! If you did, it would just undo it all. It must be an

unconscious thing. But if you only *would* believe, child, how great a hold you have on Frank, however little you may feel it in yourself, you would not *dare* throw it aside. You have his soul in your hands—I say it seriously—I am convinced you have. You see, nobody in the world knows Frank as I do; and I always did believe—and still am inclined to do so, if you will forgive me, Alethea—that nobody loves him as much, either. I own he has not always been as steady and good as he might be—but, as I say, I understand what life is like, and you don't; and it is always those who know the least who judge the most hardly. There isn't a thing in the world I wouldn't do for Frank. You may fancy I have a low standard—and I own I often talk in a worldly kind of way—but I do love goodness, and know how to admire a good man, and I'd sell my soul for Frank if it would make him one; only he—he doesn't want it! I've lost my hold over him. It is *you* he looks to and depends upon.'

There was an indescribable bitterness in Constance's tone, so manifest that even the simple Alethea must needs recognise it. But, beneath the bitterness, the intense love of this sister for her brother made itself as plainly felt, and Alethea was struck, almost awed, by the realisation of its

intensity. 'How *much* she cares for him!' thought the girl to herself. 'She would die to make him happy! I thought *I* loved him better than anybody else—but it's not with *that* sort of love. Oh, I wonder whether it *ought* to be?'

Alethea came back with a start from her reflections, for Constance was speaking again. 'Frank and I have been everything to each other hitherto,' she said. 'I can't tell you what it cost me to hear of his engagement, or how hard a struggle it was to accept his future wife. But I did it because I wanted him to be happy and good. You have it in your hands to make him both, Alethea; you won't throw the chance away—you must not—you *can't*!' Even Constance's resolute calm was broken down now. There were tears in her eyes, and her voice grew more and more unsteady. She sprang up from her chair and turned away, to master the sobs which—silent though they were—were shaking her from head to foot.

The breaking down of a strong, self-controlled person is always a formidable sight. Alethea forgot everything else in her desire to comfort Constance, though she knew not how to set about it. She laid her hand timidly on the other's arm. 'Dear Connie,' she whispered, 'don't cry so! I—I

wish we could change places, you and I. You are so brave and strong, you would help Frank; but I’m such a coward, and know so little about things. I need to be guided myself instead of guiding other people. Oh, why wasn’t I ten years older and a hundred years wiser before Frank came across me!’

Constance looked round and laughed through her tears. ‘Ah, you silly child,’ she said, ‘don’t you see that’s just where your power is—in your youth and innocence? We experienced old creatures, with our knowledge of the world and its wicked ways, haven’t half the power, with our men-kind, that youthful ignorance has! It’s *you* who can lead Frank, not I—I’ve given him up to you, with my blessing!’

Alethea stood in trembling silence, with her eyes on the ground and both hands clinging to Constance’s arm. Her companion, with a quick, impatient movement, dashed away her tears, and put her hand under the girl’s chin, so as to gain a look into her eyes.

‘You are not going to throw poor Frank and his love away?’ she asked, in a tone of unwonted gentleness. ‘Indeed, it is a mission worth having—to lead a man to better things!’

‘Oh, if I only knew what I *ought* to do!

Connie, Connie, are you *sure* you are right?' cried poor Alethea, shaken to her very depths by this appeal. She threw her arms round Constance's neck and clung to her in a tempest of sobs.

CHAPTER VIII

OPPOSING COUNSELS

ELEANOR WILSON'S capacity for enjoying herself under unlikely circumstances, and willingness to go wherever she was asked, were a recognised fact in her family circle, and a standing joke there. Her brothers and sister fancied themselves more critical than she, and were undeniably more fastidious. They had a code of their own as to where they would go and where they would not, which they adhered to with a tenacity that often annoyed their parents. But Eleanor was given credit for a certain 'omnivorousness'; and any invitation to a ball, dinner-party, or other social gathering, of doubtful promise, was, as a matter of course, handed over to her. How much of her pleasant readiness to go wherever she was wanted was due to her keen pleasure in 'seeing people,' and how much to an unselfishness so spontaneous that it was hardly

to be recognised as such, they did not stay to inquire.

It must, however, be owned that to be called upon to go to a bazaar was an effort—even to Eleanor Wilson. The fuss and heat, the elaboration of trumpery preparations, and the display of small vanities and rivalries in dress and decoration, tried even her lenient judgment of her fellow-creatures, and failed to appeal to her sense of humour, keen though it was.

It was with a lively sense of her own virtuousness and a heroic determination that she *would not* snap off the nose of any ill-judging wight who presumed to ask her to buy a 'buttonhole' or put into a raffle, that she followed her mother up the stairs of a local town hall, towards the room where a 'Fancy Sale,' for some charitable object, was going on.

It was a January afternoon—a bright, keen day on which even London had contrived not to shroud itself in fog—and the remembrance of the skating pond at Wimbledon, where Stephana, Rupert, and Ted were in the act of enjoying themselves, made the air of the hall, with its mingled odours of tea and coffee, scented soap, and drooping flowers, doubly oppressive. Eleanor's pleasant brow wore an unwonted

pucker, and her eyes were less dancing than usual.

But her shadowed looks were not for long. Soon after entering the hall she was encountered by a tall, clever-looking girl, wearing spectacles, and dressed in rather ostentatiously plain fashion, who darted upon her with a cry of joy—‘Oh, Nell, you are the very person I wanted! I’ve met that old tenant in pitched battle, and worsted him, and now we shall get the house! Just come into this corner, out of this horrid crowd, and I’ll tell you all about it.’

Eleanor emerged again from the recess between two stalls, where there was just standing room between piles of underclothing on one side and Japanese toys on the other, with a much brighter face. ‘Well, it was worth coming, only to hear that an hour sooner!’ she cried, looking back at her companion. ‘Now I must go and see that mother doesn’t buy all the most hideous things in the place.’

Eleanor went threading her way through the groups of people, in quest of her mother—her face once more full of that ‘inward glee’ to which it owed its peculiar charm. Her eyes presently fell upon a figure which she recognised, though standing with its back to her. She knew the coils of bright

hair, with the little soft curls on the slender neck, and the sloping line of the shoulders in the pretty grey dress. 'Why, there's that child—I had forgotten all about her,' was Eleanor's thought; and, through an eddy in the crowd, she made her way to where Alethea Mordaunt was standing, and laid hold of her by the arm in friendly fashion.

'My dear Alethea,' she cried, in her merriest tones, 'I want you to say something *very* crushing to me—some scathing home-truth—to take me down a bit. I'm bursting with the sense of virtue over coming here at all, which I only did out of sheer filial duty. I really do draw the line at bazaars, don't you? I must say, though, for poor mother's credit, she's no more fond of them than I am; only, you see, my father is a governor of the South-Western Hospital, so this is a case of *noblesse oblige*.'

Alethea had given a great start—as well she might—on being thus suddenly seized hold of; but her face brightened when she saw who her captor was.

'Oh, Eleanor, I never thought of seeing you here! This *is* good!' she cried delightedly.

'I've got something out of my father to spend,' Eleanor went on; 'I told him Christmas presents

had left me an absolute pauper, and I couldn't come unless he enabled me to maintain a respectable appearance! So he presented me with ten shillings, which I call very handsome of him, and I want to see how far I can make it go in toys and sweets for our Invalid Children's treat. Come along and help me.'

Alethea obediently followed, and watched Eleanor choosing her gifts with as much eagerness as if herself a child; but her own smile had quickly faded again, and she showed so pale and woe-begone a little face, and the expression of her eyes was so absent and anxious, that her companion's keen observation was soon attracted to it. She left off trying the powers of *all* the monkeys climbing sticks, and opening the heads of *all* the toy robins and pigs, to see if they contained their full complement of sweets, and hastened to finish her task.

When her basket was full she slipped her hand again through Alethea's arm and said, with a change of tone, 'My mother is safe to be here for another half-hour at least—I see her talking to the matron; and she will spend ages buying things at the nurses' stall—so do you come out and sit on the stairs with me for a little while. I know a quiet corner where nobody will molest us.'

‘But I’m supposed to be selling,’ protested Alethea, pointing to her dress, which was decorated with a sky-blue apron and bore a huge red bow on the left shoulder. ‘I am at the Mainwarings’ stall; Constance got them to invite me to help—she said it would *amuse* me!’

There was an emphasis in the girl’s tone which did not escape her companion’s ears. It was a new development indeed, to have Alethea satirical! But all Eleanor said was, ‘Oh, I know Mrs. Mainwaring’s manners and customs—she always gets about as many girls to help sell as there are goods on her stall! There are her own solid four, to begin with. I’ll answer for it you will not be missed if you come and talk to me a little while.’

The two girls made their way out to the big gaunt staircase, with the flashy decorations. In a quiet corner, half screened by curtains, was a bench. Alethea seated herself, with a sigh of utter weariness that went to her companion’s heart.

‘Oh, this *is* nice,’ she said; ‘I haven’t sat down all day—what with packing the things in Eaton Square and unpacking them here; and the princess came at two to open the affair. Constance made me go round to the Mainwarings’ directly after

breakfast. And I wasn't in bed till two, either, for she took me to a dance, and got me heaps of partners. I am so tired !'

'Constance seems very much afraid of your being dull,' remarked Eleanor tentatively.

'Yes, she keeps me going from morning till night. I—I suppose she does it to distract my thoughts!' Alethea gave a rueful laugh that was almost a sob.

'To distract your thoughts from *what*?' Eleanor turned a little, so as to look full into the face beside her, and laid her hand on Alethea's arm. She spoke with that gentle audacity, at once inviting and compelling, which those towards whom she used it found strangely irresistible. Alethea turned her face away, to hide the burning flush which overspread it, and twisted her fingers together in nervous misery.

'I—I can't tell you,' she said, under her breath. 'Constance would say I ought not.' And then, as if drawn by a force stronger than her own restraining will, she slowly turned her head and looked into that kind, compelling face. 'Oh, *am* I a great coward?' she cried imploringly. 'Do you despise me utterly for minding so much what Constance says?'

Eleanor smiled. 'No, indeed I don't despise

you,' she replied. 'I think Constance is a very difficult person to be in opposition to. But, if I were you, I wouldn't make her, or anyone else, my conscience. I am sure it never answers to do that. One is bound to judge for oneself in the long-run, and one finds one might as well have done it from the beginning.'

Eleanor felt herself speaking rather at random, for it was by intuition only that she could form any notion of the actual state of affairs. Though frequently in her thoughts, she had been prevented, by many affairs, from seeing Alethea again since the day when she visited her in bed, which was a week ago. That Constance was coercing her in some way was plain enough, but to what end had not come to light. Still, even at the risk of blundering and seeming inquisitive, Eleanor felt she must try and throw a rope to this poor, struggling child, and give her a chance of being helped, if so she might. She was the only person, outside the circle of those immediately concerned, who had any link with her, or any knowledge of her difficulties.

Her arrow, shot at a venture, proved successful beyond expectation. Alethea looked at her for a minute, with those beseeching eyes of hers—with parted lips and the colour coming and going in her

face. Then, with a sudden rush of resolution, she said, 'Whether it's wrong or not, I can't help it. I'm going to tell you all about it, Eleanor—I feel I *must*. I think Connie loves Frank too much to be a fair judge, and I *must* have someone to help me to see what is really right.'

And then, in trembling, hesitating phrases, with confusions and breaks here and there that the listener's quick apprehension did its best to supply, Alethea's poor little story came out, and Eleanor saw the situation as it was—the strong, determined nature overmastering the weak one; the wavering, hesitating will dominated by the unflinching one; the ignorance of the inexperienced child struggling vainly against the *savoir faire* of the woman of the world.

'I know it is Connie's *love* that makes her do this—her love for Frank,' faltered poor Alethea, between long, quivering breaths that had much ado not to be sobs. 'She loves him better than the whole world besides. I sometimes feel as if I didn't know what — what it means, compared to her—as if I really didn't love him at all. I believe she would sacrifice every other human being to do him good.'

'But she has no right to do that!' cried Eleanor indignantly. 'It's a most iniquitous, distorted

way of looking at things! I know people whose love for their own is of that kind, and it is only a more oblique form of selfishness—nothing better at all!’

‘Oh, I am sure Constance doesn’t see it in that light!’ protested Alethea, whose candour was one of her strong points. ‘She thinks it the finest thing anyone can do—to help another to grow better. And she will have it that *I* can make Frank different—I, and nobody else. What do you think she says?—that his *soul* is in my hands! Oh, it makes me shiver to think of it!’

Eleanor’s expression changed a little. The thought of helping, uplifting another was one which appealed strongly to the chivalrous side of her nature; and none had a more unswerving, habitual sensitiveness towards all claims which our fellow-creatures can possibly have upon us than had she.

‘Of course there *is* that side to it,’ she said thoughtfully. ‘One is always being told that men are what women make them, and there’s nothing in the world better worth doing than trying to help someone to rise “from their dead selves to higher things.” But one needs to be very strong oneself, and very steady on one’s own feet,

before one can give a pull up out of the mire to anyone else.'

'Oh yes, yes—*indeed* one must be,' answered Alethea piteously. 'I'm sure one needs to be very different to what *I* am before one can help anybody else. If Connie would *only* believe it! But she is so strong and so—so overpowering—so certain she knows that she's right and I'm all wrong, that when I am with her I, for the time, believe it too. At least, part of me believes it, but part seems to be objecting all the while. I often wonder whether it's my *good* part or my *bad* part that won't agree with Connie, but I never can make up my mind. I wish *you* would tell me.' Alethea raised her eyes, with a sad little smile in them; but Eleanor was sitting with her merry ones fixed intently on the floor, and her forehead knit in a frown of serious thought, and did not reply, except by a squeeze of her companion's hand.

After a minute Alethea went on. Her voice was at all times a subdued and curiously unyouthful one; just now, with this heavy burden oppressing her senses, it sounded in Eleanor's ears like the sighing of a melancholy, wandering breeze. Above this quiet speech the clamour of the bazaar hard by—with its trampling of feet, its indescribable

confusion of voices, and the occasional bursts of other sounds—the yelping of puppies for sale, snatches of song from canaries, and gusts of music from an inner hall where periodical concerts were being performed—rose like the roar of the ocean when a storm is beating on its breast. ‘Connie *will* believe me so much better and braver than I am,’ she went on. ‘I suppose it is because she is so strong herself, and so self-reliant, that she can’t understand how weak and helpless one may feel. Why, I want Frank to lead me and show me what is right—not for me to lead him. It’s true that I feel *miles* older than I was before—before I knew Frank, and even since I came to London. It doesn’t seem as if I were the same girl that I was back in the summer, when I thought a picnic on the Broads with the rectory people the most exciting thing in the world, and the worst bother I had in life was making the children mind me at their lessons! But though I know so much more than I did then, I think it only means that I know how *little* I know, and how helpless and stupid and incapable I am. I think I am just *beginning* to understand what it means to really pray’—Alethea’s low voice dropped still further, but her lovely eyes kindled and a trace of colour rose in her white little face;

it was plain that she was speaking out of her inmost soul — ‘and to feel that God’s love is a *real* thing, and that He does care for each separate one of us. But it is all so dim, and I often feel so very much afraid, and do so badly want helping and guiding. I think I understand exactly what the prophet felt like when he said, “I cannot speak, for I am a child.” And there’s Constance expecting me to be capable of making Frank into a good man!’

Alethea stopped, with a little gesture of her hands which spoke more than words. Eleanor was greatly touched, and her sympathetic nature was stirred to the very depths. She longed to help this perplexed, forlorn child, whose soul was thus painfully waking into life at the touch of the stern teacher Experience. Yet what a delicate matter it was to interfere in; what a responsibility to meddle between a girl and her lover! It was so evident, too, which way ran the wishes and opinions of those who had a natural claim to interfere. And what right had *she* to run counter to them? Eleanor knit her brows and pondered the situation with all the force of her keen wits.

‘There are two things I am not clear about, Alethea,’ she said, when the other ceased speaking.

‘One is — why don’t you go to Mr. Elliston himself? It ⁷seems as if Constance were doing and settling everything for him, without his having a voice in the matter! I should have thought the only fair thing was for you to tell him what you have heard said against him, and have it out with him face to face.’

Alethea’s cheeks flamed. ‘Oh, Eleanor!’ she cried, ‘why, Constance says I can’t possibly do that; Frank would be shocked at my knowing anything about such ways! And if he once thought, she says, that I didn’t believe in him and trust him, it would be all over between us, and I shouldn’t have a bit of hold upon him. You see, it’s so dreadful his being away just now. If he had only been at home, it would all have been different. But he went away just the day before — before *that* party — and he won’t be back till some time next week. He has got shooting parties on at Ashenden, and a lot of business besides — and he hardly writes, and I don’t know how to write to him with all this on my mind, and — and — it’s altogether wretched and miserable!’

‘I don’t agree with Constance one bit!’ cried Eleanor indignantly. ‘It’s just an example of her crooked seeing. No one has a right to interfere between two engaged people. And to hide up a

thing of this kind will *never* answer—you may be sure it won't. Indeed, Alethea, you had *far* better write at once to Frank and tell him everything that's on your mind.'

'I don't know—I must think,' answered poor Alethea doubtfully. 'It seems so horrid, when I've accepted him, to be picking holes in him like this. And it would make him so angry—and Constance would be so dreadfully shocked at me!'

Eleanor paused a moment. She was one who at all times shrank from seeming to override the wills of others, or forcing them to see any matter under discussion from her own point of view; and though she felt, with the strongest conviction, that the right course for Alethea to take was to speak to her lover, she did not like to go on urging it when once her say was said. 'Well,' she continued, after a minute's hesitation, 'there's the other thing I want to know. You say you want somebody to advise you—why don't you tell your mother all about it? Do you know, I really think you *ought*. Mothers are given us for times like these! Surely she would be able to advise you?'

'Oh, I *couldn't*,' said Alethea, shaking her head. 'Mother hates judging things—she says it's such a responsibility! She has always let us have our

own way since we were quite small, and she says we must settle things for ourselves, and learn by experience! She would only say she couldn't interfere, and I must judge for myself. Of course, if father were at home it would be quite different. He's like a rock to lean upon! But India's such a long way off—and, besides, his regiment is now on the march into Afghanistan. A letter would take weeks to reach him.'

Eleanor could only wonder at the gentleness and docility of the daughter whom such a *laissez faire* genus of mother had produced. Instead of the masterful and independent young person whom such a régime ought by rights to have created, this Alethea was more easily led and had a less aggressive will of her own than any of her contemporaries whom Eleanor, in her wide experience of her kind, had come across.

'You poor child, I *am* sorry for you!' said the compassionate voice; and then there was another pause, while Eleanor was thinking what to advise (with an uneasy consciousness at the back of her mind that her mother must by now be quite ready to go, and would be searching high and low through the bazaar for her), and Alethea was just resting her weary self against her, and feeling the comfort of her loving sympathy and strength.

‘You know, Alethea,’ Eleanor said at last, ‘it’s a fearful thing to have to advise in such a matter as this. It’s so—sacred, anything between two people who have promised to love each other; one hardly dares to lay one’s hand to it, for fear of doing harm. Only—I’ll just tell you what I think, and then—dear—you must judge what is right to do. I don’t agree with Constance—I say it deliberately; I don’t think she is being just or candid. I think her love for Frank keeps her from seeing things straight, and makes her unfair to you. I believe it’s—well, false sentiment about your saving him. It’s not the way to do it. You would—forgive me, Alethea, for saying it—be marrying a man you don’t thoroughly respect and believe in; and affection that is going to stand the wear and tear of life must have respect in it—I am certain of that. Nothing less will bear the strain.’

‘But I love Frank—oh, I *love* him!’ sobbed Alethea, putting up her hands to hide her tearful face. ‘I would give everything I care about to save him! Only, nobody will believe it, if I throw him over like this—Constance won’t believe it, and he won’t believe it himself.’

Some old words flitted through Eleanor Wilson’s mind—a famous saying about losing one’s life to

find it—about becoming maimed, or halt, or blind, as the price of ‘entering into life eternal.’ She wondered whether it might not be so in this case—whether the act which Alethea so dreaded—which seemed to her so cruel, and calculated to work such harm—might not be the one thing which would bring Frank to his senses—whether the losing of the woman he loved might not be the saving of his soul.

But she could not say this to Alethea—she could only try to comfort her distress, and strengthen her to see the matter as she herself so clearly saw it. ‘Never mind what people believe,’ she said gently; ‘if he doesn’t see it now as it really is, he will in time, and Constance also. Sometimes we have to walk blindfold, you know, and in the dark. It seems to me that’s just the one guiding thread you’ve got—that one ought not to marry where one does not trust; and if you will only hold on tight to that, and be brave, it will carry you through. And—*do* write to Mr. Elliston and tell him all about it.’

‘I promised Connie faithfully I wouldn’t write without telling her first; and I shall never screw myself up to do *that*,’ sighed poor Alethea. Eleanor’s flush of vexation and the movement of her lips showed what she thought of that admission.

All she said, however, was, 'I must be going. Stand up, dear, and let me put you tidy, to face the Mainwarings. Your mob cap is all awry, and your red bow is in the act of taking to itself wings.'

'Oh, *must* you go?' cried the other piteously. The kindly alcove hid them from all curious eyes; Alethea crept close to her friend and threw her clinging arms about her. 'When I'm with you, Eleanor, I feel so quiet and so safe. I can hear the lions roaring, but a long way off, and I feel they can't touch me. But when I get back to Constance I know she'll twist me round her finger, and make me see everything from her point of view again. Oh, if you knew what it was to feel like a lump of clay in somebody's hands!'


'Poor lump of clay!' said Eleanor merrily. She held the girl close for a moment, then pushed her gently from her and led the way downstairs. 'It's time to show you have got a will of your own, and won't be led against your judgment. Remember Christian's lions in the path—they turned into lambs when he walked boldly up to them!'

Alethea tried to laugh, but it was a poor attempt; and Eleanor stood in the doorway of the hall, watching the slim figure threading its way through the groups of people, with a very

full heart. Which would prevail — she or Constance? Would that weak will succumb, or would it fight its way through, acting bravely ‘in the scorn of consequence’? Eleanor had seldom felt more interested, more pitiful, more longing to help. She turned with comfort to the thought of the one thing she could still do—the one best way in which she could still ‘strengthen the weak hands’ which had been so piteously held out to her.

CHAPTER IX

‘HE THAT FIGHTS AND RUNS AWAY’

HE dawn breaks slowly and sulkily through the thick atmosphere of London in winter.

There is no colour about it, no mystery, no surprise. It comes, as it were, by a kind of negative process, and it is more by the gradual withdrawal of night than by the apparent entrance of morning that one knows another day has begun.

Eleanor Wilson was lying in bed, in that pleasant state between sleeping and waking which can only be enjoyed in the morning, and which owes half its charm to our sub-consciousness that it is liable to be demolished at any moment by the unwelcome summons to get up. It was a morning in January, a week later than the day of the hospital bazaar—a raw, inclement morning, but without fog. Eleanor lay thinking, between snatches of sleep, of pleasant

things far away—of the Swiss mountain she and her brother had ascended last autumn, and the wonders of its glimpses of other peaks and into the depths of mighty glaciers, and of the crystal airs breathing over its sunlit fields of snow—of the novel she meant to write some day, when more of that blessed thing called leisure should be hers—of the coming summer and its birds, and fresh leaves, and flowers — and all the treasures of Nature so inexpressibly delightful to her beauty-loving senses.

She was roused from her dreams with a start, by an unusual sound—as of someone tapping at her window—and opened her sleepy eyes to behold the ‘glimmering square’ behind the blind, and to guess, by its comparative brightness, that the hour must be somewhere approaching seven. ‘How odd—it must be a bird!’ thought Eleanor; and she closed her eyes again, and tried to conjure up the Wengel-Alp in its dazzling whiteness.

A minute later a similar tap roused her completely, and she sat up in bed. ‘It sounds just as if somebody were throwing something at my window!’ she said, half aloud; and, as if to confirm her impression, another tap followed, about which there could be no mistake. But who in the world was likely to be throwing things

against the window of a house in a West End street?

Eleanor sprang from her bed and was across the room in a moment. She pushed aside the blind and peered down into the misty street, where the light and darkness seemed to be struggling together, and the street lamps, not yet extinguished, threw out round patches of light that only made the dimness beyond their vista the more confusing.

Yes! there was another stone; and Eleanor could see a figure standing on the pavement, on the opposite side of the road, with its arm raised, evidently in the act to repeat the offence. The arm dropped, however, as the lifted blind and the face at the window made themselves apparent; the figure moved into the circle of light from a lamp-post, and Eleanor, with a quick breath of astonishment, recognised Alethea Mordaunt.

Yes, Alethea it certainly was. She stood there, in the lamplight, looking up towards the window; and, when the movement of the blind showed her that she was perceived, she put up her hand and beckoned—first turning to give a glance, on either side, along the street. The light showed that her lips were moving. Her whole figure seemed to say, ‘Eleanor, come down!’

No second bidding was needed. In the

twinkling of an eye Eleanor had clad herself in her dressing-gown, and was speeding on her way downstairs. The whole house was silent and still asleep. 'After all, it can't be much after six,' she thought, as she fumbled with the fastenings of the front door, which was still securely bolted and barred. She opened it a little way and peered out.

Alethea was still standing under the lamp-post, with her face raised and her whole attitude full of anxiety; but at the sound of the opening door she scudded across the road, two eager hands clutched at Eleanor, and a cold white face was pressed against her own.

'Alethea! What in the world brings you out at this unearthly hour?' cried the other girl. 'Are you *sure* you are not a burglar in disguise?'

'No—oh no!' gasped Alethea, between laughing and crying. 'It's only that I've—I've run away, Eleanor, and—and *will* you lend me some money to take me home?'

Eleanor opened the door a little wider. 'Here, come inside,' she whispered. 'I'm not exactly clad to meet the elements! Come into the hall, and tell me what on earth you are about.'

Alethea was trembling with excitement; but she tried to pull herself together and speak quietly.



'I've come away from Chester Square, Eleanor. I'm going home. It *is*—early, I know, but that's just the point of it. It just made it—possible; only I've not got money enough for my ticket, I find, and so I had to come to you, for I *knew* you would help me, dear, dear Eleanor!'

'Stop, I want to understand!' cried Eleanor. She tried to make her voice sound stern, and hoped the duskiness of the hall hid the twinkle of amusement in her eye. 'Do you mean to say that Lady Elliston doesn't know what you are doing—neither she nor Constance?'

'No, nobody knows. I didn't know myself till early this morning. I've not been to sleep all night, thinking about it, and at last I made up my mind. I've got some things in a bag—see—and I've packed my box, ready for them to send it after me. I suppose they will do that?—though, of course, they'll be dreadfully angry with me.' Alethea's voice faltered a little, in spite of her resolution, and for a moment she nearly lost her composure. She was evidently in a state of great nervous tension.

'Upon my word!' exclaimed Eleanor, planting her back against the wall, and surveying her young companion from head to foot. 'To think that a mouse like you should have made up its mind to

do anything so strong-minded! I never would have believed it of you, Alethea! What in the world do you think Constance will say?’

‘*Constance?*’ cried poor Alethea, with a shiver. ‘Oh, I don’t know—I am afraid to think. But it is just *she* who has driven me to it. I believe she’s sent for Frank to come home sooner, for I got a letter from him yesterday, saying he is coming to-morrow, though I know he didn’t mean to come till the beginning of the week. And when I told Constance he was coming, she laughed in that curious way of hers that seems to mean all sorts of things, and I’m sure she knew all about it, and had arranged it beforehand. And at bed-time’—Alethea made a halt, as if she could hardly bring herself to speak of it—‘at bed-time she came into my room, and said she must have a talk. And then she went through it all again—about my saving Frank and my influence being everything to him, and—and all the rest; and tried to make me *promise* I wouldn’t say a word to him about—what I’d heard, and behave to him just exactly as if nothing had happened.’

‘And what did you say?’ asked Eleanor, as the narrator paused again.

‘I said I wasn’t going to promise—I *couldn’t*. I said I’d *try* and forget it, but I felt sure I never

should. It was always in my mind, and I knew it would come out. And that I *couldn't* feel certain she was right; I didn't feel strong enough or good enough to keep Frank straight. I wanted him to help *me*. And Constance was very—angry—very angry *indeed*.' Alethea's voice dropped, and Eleanor thought she was going to burst out crying; but with a mighty effort she controlled herself, and hurried on. 'She said—oh, such dreadful things!—about my being only too lucky to have Frank care about me at all—and that I ought not to be so conceited and opinionated, and—and everything that was horrid and unkind. And I think she went away believing that I *had* given in, and was going to do as she wanted; but I never uttered a word—*indeed*, Eleanor, I didn't—that she had any right to take as a promise. I said, over and over again, that I *couldn't* give a promise—that I must wait and see what I felt like when I saw Frank, and that I didn't believe it was *right* to do as she wanted, and that it wasn't acting fairly by him either.'

'Bravo, Alethea!—I shouldn't have believed you had it in you!' was Eleanor's comment; but she kept it to herself, and only looked at her companion with those bright encouraging eyes of hers.

‘And I’ve been lying awake all night, trying to think what I had best do,’ went on Alethea, with piteous bravery. ‘I *can’t* face Frank and pretend I feel just as I did before; and I can’t face Constance if I’m going to do what she thinks so abominable. And so — so I made up my mind that the only thing was to—to go home before he came, and not give anybody the chance to stop me. And you *will* help me, Eleanor? I can’t do it without your help, for I’ve spent all my money but two shillings, and mother hasn’t sent me any more—and I’ve no one in the world to go to if you won’t stand my friend.’

Eleanor said nothing, even with her responsive eyes. Her keen wits were at work reviewing the situation. She felt what a critical passage it was in this young life—indeed, in two lives—and how much might depend upon the counsel she gave and the action she took at this crucial moment. Should she refuse to lend the money, and by that simple little action compel Alethea to go back to the house she had left—there to follow Constance’s bidding and begin her married life on a foundation of distrust and misgiving? Or should she speed her on her way, and thus be a party to the breaking off of an engagement, with its inevitable consequences of unhappiness, disappointment, and

injured feeling? Eleanor stood pondering, with her eyes on the floor, and with the swift uplifting of an inward prayer for a ‘right judgment’ in this difficult case.

‘I *must* go home — oh, I *must*!’ broke out Alethea, after watching her a moment breathlessly. In her state of high tension suspense was unbearable. ‘I *won’t* go back to Chester Square. I shall walk all the way to Gorleston, if you won’t lend me the money to go by train.’

‘See, Alethea,’ said Eleanor slowly; ‘I suppose you understand what it means—your going home? It means the breaking off of your engagement. At least, it seems to me that it can be nothing less than that. Have you really thought of it in that way?’

‘Yes, I have — I know it means that,’ said Alethea resolutely. ‘I would rather give Frank up than marry him under false pretences. If only he were to come and ask me *why* I am doing this, I should tell him plainly all about it. But I don’t suppose he will do that. He will be so very angry, and will never want to have anything more to do with me! But I *do* know it means that I shall not be engaged to him any longer. See, I’ve already taken off my ring! I’ve written him a note, and left it for him on my dressing-table.

I've made up my mind.' The words came out boldly, though the tears were running down her cheeks.

Eleanor took the slim, childish hand, denuded of its sparkling ring, in her strong, tender clasp. 'Dear, don't cry,' she said. 'You shall have the money and go home. I—it's very hard to judge, but somehow I believe it will be the best. I believe you are doing right. And—"What is right *comes* right," you know. I will fetch my purse in a moment.'

Eleanor's red-robed form was already half-way up the first flight when a fresh thought struck her, and she darted noiselessly down again.

'By the way, what time is your train? And how do you intend to get to the station?' she demanded.

'Oh, I don't know about the train—I hadn't got a *Bradshaw*. I'm going to take my chance. There's sure to be one soon, if I can only get to Liverpool Street,' sighed poor Alethea, whose one thought now was to be gone. 'And I can walk there, I suppose—there are no cabs so early, are there?—it can't be very far. It didn't seem so when I came. I must ask my way.'

'Oh, Liverpool Street is miles away, and through such a maze of streets! You will take hours

getting there alone,’ replied Eleanor, laughing. It was a relief to find something, however small, to laugh about. ‘But see, it is only half-past six yet, you early bird; I shall have plenty of time to come with you and get back before nine o’clock. Sit down here and wait for me. I shan’t be five minutes.’

Such a proposal was only too welcome to Alethea. To have Eleanor for a companion was worth waiting for, even though every moment added to her anxiety and nervous terror. In less time than seemed possible Eleanor reappeared, in her walking dress, and the girls sallied forth together, shutting the street door noiselessly behind them.

It was light now out of doors; there was a faint quiver of dawn appearing behind the bare boughs in the Royal Gardens, and the tardy winter day was really beginning. Alethea crimsoned with apprehension, and glanced nervously this way and that, as if expecting Constance herself to appear in pursuit. But the West End is not an early place, least of all on winter mornings, and two or three cats, sloping homewards after their night’s revels, were the only moving creatures visible between the lines of slumbering houses.

‘Come along,’ said Eleanor; ‘if we are going to run away, let us do it in style.’ And the two girls joined hands and scampered down the street at a pace which they could not sustain for long. By and by a cab came in sight, which they hailed, and so made their way onwards to the Great Eastern terminus.

It was a silent journey for the most part. Alethea leant back in her corner and shut her eyes, as if too much tired out to speak or move, and Eleanor sat upright, her quick glances surveying the awakening London world, with the shops slowly opening their doors and the milk carts proceeding on their rounds, while her thoughts went over and over the difficult problem which had fallen in her way. She wondered whether Alethea’s absence had yet been discovered? — what the attitude of Constance and Lady Elliston would be? — how Frank himself would take the flight of his lady-love? — and, finally, what would be the issue of it all? ‘If Frank Elliston is worth anything, he will come after her and insist on understanding the whole matter.’ thought Eleanor; ‘and that may just mean his turning over a new leaf, and setting himself to become worthy of her. For he isn’t a bit worthy of her now — I’m certain he isn’t. And if he

doesn't come, it means she is well quit of him, though, of course, she won't realise that, poor little soul! Oh, it *is* an ordeal for her! And such a child as she is to face it all alone, with nobody's backing but — mine! She is doing what few people I know would have the courage for.' Eleanor looked round at the little white face in the corner, and her eyes filled with tears.

The cab—it was a very old and 'growlerish' one, with an ancient nag to it, who, to judge by his speed, had been out all night—rattled and creaked upon its way through the empty City streets, where a few omnibuses were the sole form of traffic in motion. Alethea only once looked up and spoke. She started forward, suddenly, with an exclamation of pain—'Oh, Eleanor, it means losing *you* too! Oh, I hadn't thought of *that*! When shall I ever see you again?'

'Oh no, it's not *losing* me, Alethea. We are friends, and always shall be. You are to write to me as often as you can and will—don't forget that. And you will have to come and stay with me; and we will explore City churches and do the Greek statues thoroughly at the British Museum, and have a regular good time of it together.'

Alethea tried to smile and look grateful, in response to the cheery voice; though at the same

time she shook her head. 'I shall never want to come to London again. I shall never care for anything here,' she said mournfully. Eleanor, from the experience of twenty-seven, could not help smiling at the 'nevers' of nineteen; but her companion had slipped back into her corner once more, and she thought it kindest to let her alone.

Tea and stale buns proved to be forthcoming at Liverpool Street, in spite of the early hour; and they brought some colour back into Alethea's cheeks and life into her eyes. Half an hour more and her ticket was taken, herself and her little bag were installed in the train, and that 'eleventh hour' was come—that very last moment wherein it is yet possible to draw back—which to apprehensive and quaking souls has more agony in it than the painfullest of accomplished facts.

A wave of sickening fear and doubt swept over the girl's mind, and showed itself in her face. Eleanor was standing at the carriage door with her hand upon it. Alethea drew a long breath, and put both her hands on those strong, warm fingers. 'Oh, Eleanor,' she cried, '*have* I done right? I could still jump out and come back with you, and you would never tell anyone about it! Oh, hadn't

I better? Perhaps I’m quite wrong! If I *only* knew! Oh dear, I’m *so* frightened!’

But Eleanor looked at her and smiled, with a merry, encouraging look. ‘There’s the guard waving,’ she said; ‘so you *can’t* come back now. The die is cast. But, my dear, don’t look like that; cheer up and go on bravely, and it will work out right in the end—you may be confident it will. You have tried honestly to follow the light, and it won’t betray you. Only follow it on, and don’t be afraid of where it may lead you—even though it be in “a bare and rugged way.” “Commit thy way unto the Lord,” Alethea. Good-bye; God bless you!’

And as the whistle sounded and the train moved out of the station, the last sight which Alethea saw, through a mist of tears, was the charming face of Eleanor Wilson, looking after her with eyes full of strength and comfort, and that humorous, kindly smile on her lips.

CHAPTER X

AFTER TWO YEARS

WE are on Gorleston Pier again, nearly two years later than the day when we first saw Alethea Mordaunt there; only it is a morning in June now, and not an evening in August. Alethea is there again, standing near the edge of the pier and looking down into the water with a thoughtful face; but her companion this time is not the lively Bob—he has joined his brothers at the Yarmouth Grammar School—but a little sick sister of ten years, lying flat and helpless in an invalid carriage. The child cranes up her neck now and then, when the dip of oars or the flapping of a sail against the mast tells that a boat is speeding by to seaward; but for the most part she lies still and quiet enough, and gets her amusement from the descriptions and remarks which Alethea gives her from time to time.

The time which had passed since Alethea Mordaunt took her life into her own hands and fled home that winter morning, had brought many hard experiences to the girl and taught her many lessons. She had not been at home a week before her mother—roving about in the east wind with a neglected cold—fell very ill, and lay for weeks between life and death. It was a most trying and laborious time for poor Alethea. She not only had to help to nurse the invalid, but also to rule the disorderly little household and take care of the unmanageable tribe of brothers and sisters, while all the time carrying about with her an aching heart. That spring was indeed a dark time for the girl, and, as she toiled along, the episode of her London visit and her engagement to Frank Elliston hovered in her memory like a strange, uncanny dream.

Then, before Mrs. Mordaunt was really strong again, a fresh anxiety came. Hester, one of the little girls, began to pine and to limp, and it became apparent that a fall downstairs, which she had had during the worst days of her mother's illness, was going to have serious consequences. Her tumble had been taken no notice of at the time. Lottie, her twin, had picked her up and wiped her eyes; and Hal, her eldest brother, had

given her a penny, on condition that she 'stopped her noise and didn't bother Ally'; and so the damage, which might have been easily remedied if taken in hand at once, had grown into what threatened permanent lameness.

The sick child became Alethea's special charge, and most tenderly she watched over her. Hester was a bright, eager being, full of life and of plans, and to be kept a prisoner in bed, with a heavy weight tied to her ankle, and often suffering much from pain and restlessness, was a trial indeed to so undisciplined a creature. It needed all her eldest sister's patience, ingenuity, and watchfulness to nurse her and keep her still, happy, and patient; and the task brought out the tender womanliness and helpfulness of Alethea's nature, and drew upon and developed all her powers.

These trials, heavy as they were, would have been easy enough to bear—or so Alethea thought—but for the inward trouble and heaviness which went everywhere with her. When she broke off her engagement and went home, it must be owned that, at the bottom of her heart, she held the belief that Frank would never let it rest there; that if he loved her as he said he did, he would certainly follow her to Gorleston; that the whole story would be told, and that—well, if he *were* to

blame, still, there would be some explanation, some promise of amendment that she could accept, and on the strength of which their engagement might go on. 'I shouldn't be hard upon you, Frank,' said the poor child to herself. 'All will come right again, I am sure, if *only* you will come and ask me what it is that stands between us.'

Those first two days after her home-coming were a nightmare of suspense and anguish that Alethea never willingly thought of in after years. On the third day came a letter from Frank—half a dozen lines full of nothing but anger and injured feeling, to which silence was the only reply possible. Lady Elliston wrote an incoherent effusion, full of dashes and exclamation marks, and bearing evident traces of tears shed upon it, but offering no help and bringing no comfort. From Constance there came—nothing at all!

It was a merciful thing for the poor child that just at that time her mother's illness began, and her thoughts and energies were drawn forcibly aside into another channel; or the pain and distress of those days would have been more than her brain could bear. In quiet moments, when sitting by her mother's bed, or when out of doors on hurried errands, she went over and over those

miserable scenes in London, or repeated, under her breath, the reproachful, angry sentences of her lover's letter, wondering to herself, in dull misery, how he *could* have found it in his heart to treat her so, and whether he had ever loved her at all, since he could let her go so easily. But, fortunately for her, her powers, both of body and mind, were so heavily drawn upon, that at night she fell asleep, like a log, the moment her head touched the pillow, and during the day her senses were so much blunted by fatigue and anxiety that she seemed to herself unable to feel anything very acutely.

A letter which she at length received from Constance brought her a yet keener sting and a more burning sense of unhappiness. It reached her about three months after her return home, when the worst of Mrs. Mordaunt's illness was over, and her daughter had leisure to review and realise her own troubles. It came, too, in the pleasant spring-time, when—even in the tardy eastern counties—Nature was 'all a-blowing, all a-glowing,' and when Alethea, poor child, was full of an instinctive, passionate longing to be having her 'fresh spring,' too, of happiness and joy of life.

Constance's letter was sad and bitter and reproachful. Frank, it said, had been made most

unhappy by Alethea's behaviour; he had been restless and unsettled ever since, and had told his sister, again and again, that he did not care what became of him—that he did not mind what sort of a life he led, since Alethea had thrown him over. Constance, it must be owned, made the utmost, in her letter, of these reckless speeches, and did not fail to hint that he would certainly act upon them—nay, that he was already inclining to do so. Someone more versed in the world and its ways than little Alethea would no doubt have been able to take this for what it was worth, and to discount the prejudiced, jealous spirit of the writer. But to Alethea it was all unmitigated anguish; and when she came to one short, bitter sentence, wherein the whole matter was summed up—‘You, and you only, are responsible for this’—the words, written square and black, in Constance's vigorous handwriting, seemed to dance before her eyes and burn themselves into her brain. She lifted a blanched, horror-struck face from her reading, and looked round with a shiver, feeling as if the brand of Cain were upon her forehead. Frank was going to the bad, and she was to blame for his doing so!

The misery of that thought seemed, in its first

crude horribleness, more than Alethea could bear. It would have been indeed a happy thing for the poor child had there been anyone to whom she could go with her trouble; the very putting of it into words would have shown it in a new light; and a friend with sense and judgment would have helped her to see how grossly overstrained and unfair Constance's accusation was. But Mrs. Mordaunt was in no state, as yet, to be troubled with painful questions; and Eleanor Wilson was away on a tour in the Holy Land, and difficult of access by letters. Alethea had no one to turn to, and had to bear her burden alone as best she might. Happily for her, little Hester's accident and its results came just at that time to the fore, and the fresh call for exertion and self-forgetfulness made itself heard at the very moment when she most utterly needed help.

It is strange in what guises the Angel of Help comes to us! He comes in the shape of a heavy trial, just when we fancy we can least bear it; and behold, our shoulders, which were aching under one burden, carry two with ease! He comes to us, taking away the bodily strength and powers which seemed to bring us the sole pleasures we had in life; and lo! the hour of our weakness brings us spiritual joys and silent consolations

which transfigure the whole of our being! When little Hester fell ill, and Alethea first heard from the doctor's lips that hip-joint disease had begun, and that the child would need careful nursing for months, and the utmost attention and care that could be given her, she felt that she *could* not face it—that it was more than our Heavenly Father could, in justice, lay on one already so unhappy and so heavily weighted.

But when she went back into the nursery, and Hester put her little arms round her neck and hid her flushed face on her breast, the tide of tenderness flowed back again, warm and strong; and she felt that, however hard the struggle might be, she would do her best for her little sister. And ere long, in the absorption of her loving cares, she could only wonder to find her own personal trouble so possible to bear.

Those hard days of illness and anxiety were over now, and easier times were beginning for the Mordaunts. Mrs. Mordaunt had recovered her health, and little Hester, though still forbidden to walk, was gaining ground daily, and there was every prospect of her being entirely cured. Best of all, Colonel Mordaunt's regiment had come home from India, and he himself had

received an appointment in a southern county—a good appointment, which, while it lasted, would make him a prosperous man. They were to leave Gorleston, and move to a pleasant house in Surrey.

The weight lifted off Alethea's young shoulders by her father's return was heavier than she knew till it was gone. Time, too, had taken the keenest edge off her sorrow over her broken engagement; Frank Elliston was less ceaselessly present to her thought; and she felt as if—could a certain dull heartache only have been taken away—she might be beginning to know what it felt like to be happy and light-hearted again. But, though less constantly realised, that heartache was always there, and so was the sense of keen disappointment in the man to whom she had given her love—the sore-hearted, injured feeling of how badly he had treated her. There was, too, the undefined but intense longing to hear some news of him; to know how it was with him; to hear that, after all, he was 'being good,' and that Constance's dreadful predictions had not come true. For since that one painful letter of hers no word had come; the only news of Frank that had ever reached poor Alethea was the fact, mentioned in one of Eleanor Wilson's letters, that he had gone abroad

for a year or two, and was said to be intending to make his way across the desert of Central Asia.

The Mordaunts had now come to the last days of their life at Gorleston. Alethea's daily pilgrimage to the pier, with Hester in her light perambulator, would only be made once or twice more.

The thought of this kept both of them silent on that June morning when we see them there. Hester was thinking of all the fish she would have caught, and all the sea-bathing she would have had, if only she had been able to run about like Lottie, during this last year of their life by the seaside. Alethea, too, was going over in her mind their Gorleston days, and thinking — for the thousandth time—with puzzled, sorrowful ponderings—of that episode of her engagement; of those four months of mixed experiences, which now, more than ever, seemed 'as a dream when one awaketh.'

Suddenly a step sounded on the echoing planks of the pier, and a shadow fell across their bleached, dusty surface. Alethea woke from her reverie and looked up with a start—looked up to find the brown eyes of her dreams gazing at her

out of a bronzed, sunburnt face, no longer with the self-satisfied, careless affectionateness of old times, but full of an earnest, humble, passionate tenderness that was as new as it was unmistakable.

‘Alethea, I have not a word to say for myself—my behaviour to you has been beyond all justification—but can you ever forgive me?’

And Alethea came back to the present to find her hands clasped in Frank’s, and to see him looking at her with his soul in his eyes.

‘The very first thing we must do before we go about our shopping,’ said Mrs. Frank Elliston to her husband, ‘is to go round to Chester Street, and see if Eleanor Wilson is at home. I do so hope she won’t have gone down to the country yet. You know I wrote to her, Frank, from Paris, and told her how soon we should be in London, and asked her to let me know when she could come and see me. I thought we should find an answer when we got to Chester Square yesterday, but there was nothing. It’s not like Eleanor to leave letters unanswered; so that makes me think she must have gone down to Herefordshire. Dear, dear Eleanor—I do so long to see her again! I wonder if you know what was the *last* time that

she and I were together, Frank? Can you guess?
—I've told you all about it.'

Alethea edged a shade closer to her husband, and looked up at him with a deepening colour and half-laughing, half-serious glance. Her soft young face bore its prettiest wild-rose tints, and her eyes were shining and dancing with happiness. In all the bravery of her trousseau raiment she looked as fresh and sweet a creature as anyone might wish to see. It was plain enough what her husband thought of her, as his eyes surveyed her with a proud, satisfied look.

It mattered little to either of them that the houses of polite Eaton Square, down which they were passing, were almost all shut up; that the roadway was empty of carriages, and the leaves of the trees in the Square gardens were showing wrinkled, dusty, and yellow—that London, in short, was looking its dullest and shabbiest, and bearing on its face plain evidence that the season was over and everybody gone out of town. Were they not just home from their wedding journey, and spending a few busy days in the Chester Square house before going down to install themselves at Ashenden Place?

It was clear enough—from the smile and look that passed between them—how perfect was the

understanding between husband and wife. 'Yes,' Frank answered, 'I know what that time was—the morning when Nell Wilson helped a certain young woman to run away! I suppose, in the natural order of things, I should have a big quarrel to pick with her; but I've found out, you see, that it was just the best turn she could have done me, and that it is all thanks to *her*, really, that—that—you and I are what we are to each other, my darling, to-day.'

'I know, Frank—I understand,' said his wife softly. 'We both owe Eleanor more than we can *ever* thank her for. Only she won't believe it—she never does! I wonder whether we shall see her this morning?'

'Look, there's old Sir Alexander crossing the Square,' remarked Frank. 'He would be able to tell us where she is. How much he has begun to stoop, and how he's creeping along, poor old fellow! If we walk quickly, we shall easily overtake him.'

An elderly man, whose face bore a strong family likeness to Eleanor Wilson's, was walking slowly down a cross street, with his back bowed and his eyes on the ground. He pulled himself up with a start as he heard his name spoken, and saw a couple of people bearing down upon him.

‘How do you do, Sir Alexander?’ said Alethea’s pleasant young voice. ‘We are so glad to see you. It means, I hope, that Eleanor is still in town? We were — we were coming’ — But there she faltered and stopped, with a puzzled, anxious look. Something in Sir Alexander Wilson’s face had checked her eager speech, she knew not why.

‘Oh! what is it?’ she cried, answering to his look, not his words, for he had not yet spoken. ‘What is the matter? Why do you look at me like that?’

‘My dear, don’t you know? Hasn’t Stephana written? Or the papers—did you not see it there?’ The old man spoke with his eyes on the ground, and in a sunk, subdued voice, as if he were keeping himself aloof from emotion of any kind. ‘The news hasn’t reached you, then, of our dear Eleanor’s death?’

‘No,’ answered Alethea, in a husky whisper. Something was clutching at her throat, so that she could hardly breathe or speak.

‘It happened ten days ago—she was only ill a week,’ went on the old man, in the same dull, even voice. ‘I am afraid we managed badly about letting people know; and it came as a shock to many who loved her. We are very sorry for that;

but it was—difficult. You will forgive us, I am sure, under the circumstances.’

‘Yes, indeed—pray don’t think of it for a moment!’ interposed Frank Elliston, for he saw that his wife could not speak. He paused and hesitated; all words seemed so inadequate. Then, acting on the unspoken wish he could read in Alethea’s blanched face, he said gently, ‘Do you mind telling us what was the cause of it?’

‘Inflammation of the lungs. She caught cold at her factory girls’ treat. She was only ill one week. We buried her on Monday.’ He stopped, and his sunken, tired eyes lifted themselves and travelled from one young face to the other with a wistful, considering look. He was dwelling, perhaps, on their vigour and freshness—thinking of the contrast they made with a face he had lately looked upon. He caught sight of tears rolling down Alethea’s cheeks.

‘My child,’ he said, ‘you knew our dear Eleanor well, and loved her. She recognised us all just before the end, and sent her love to all her friends, and told us she was not afraid, and we were not to grieve about her going. You know what she was like—how she was always in love with joy; and now she has joy and gladness as her portion for ever. At least, that is what they tell me I must

believe. I don't know much about those things myself; and—and it is mostly very blank to me. I cannot get beyond the fact that

“She is in her grave, and oh!
The difference to me”—

But I must not detain you. Good-morning to you both.’ And the old man bowed and went his way with the same lost, dreaming look on his face, sadder than any tears.

A sob that could not be kept back broke from poor Alethea. Frank pulled her hand through his arm and turned with her into a side street, where the pavement was a desert and there was hardly a creature within view. Her tears were dropping like rain, and her shoulders were shaking with her sobs. ‘Eleanor dead!—my dear Eleanor dead!’ she cried; ‘and I never knew it! Oh, it doesn’t seem *possible*! It can’t—*can’t* be true!’ She clung to her husband’s arm and looked up piteously in his face. Frank stood, stroking the little hand which rested on his arm, in a helpless bewilderment of trouble and pity. He was honestly grieved, for his own part, at this news about his old playmate, and was also full of distress at the sight of his wife in tears—for the first time since their wedding day. If only he knew what to say that might comfort her! But ‘Don’t cry, dear—

it's awfully sad, but don't cry,' was all he could think of.

'Why *should* she have been taken away like this?' broke out Alethea again, after a minute of choking grief. 'She was the very best friend I ever knew; and she was leading the most beautiful life; and we all looked to her and needed her so much—and—and now she's gone, all in a moment—quite utterly out of our reach! And she was going to do so much, and had such wonderful plans, and all to help and cheer other people! So many of us might have been taken away who were so little good! But Eleanor, who had so much on hand, and whom everybody loved and wanted, oh! how can we do without her? And, Frank, she was so *full* of life, and the world was so beautiful and interesting to her—she *can't* have been willing to die! It's so *impossible* to think of her and death together!'

Frank Elliston found his tongue at last, and spoke out of the thoughts that were in him. 'My darling,' he said, 'I don't know—I've no right, God knows, to speak of such things!—but surely we need not think of her and death together? She is not dead—she has only entered into Life—into that fuller life she was always striving and longing after. It would be impossible ever to think of her

as dead, and we need not do it. Let us think of her as more truly alive than she has ever been yet; serving God and seeing His face as well; and with all that made life worth living infinitely more her own than it was here. I believe that is the only true, real way to think of her. We owe her—you and I—more than we can ever say; let us think of her as *she* would wish us to do—with thankful hearts.'

And Alethea looked at her husband with eyes that were full of wondering respect as well as love, and by degrees was comforted.

THE END

TWO SHILLING STORIES.

Crown 8vo. Illustrated. 2s., cloth boards.



A Girl's Experiment.

By MARGARET KESTON. 2s.

A Child in Westminster Abbey.

By MARY E. PALGRAVE. 2s.

The Rickerton Medal. A Board School Story.

By JOHN ADAMS. 2s.

Through Ways Unknown.

By A. L. WILSON. 2s.

'Twixt Dawn and Day.

By Mrs. A. D. PHILPS. 2s.

The Twins that did not Pair.

By H. LOUISA BEDFORD. 2s.

Stranger Margaret.

By MARY HAMPDEN. 2s.

The Wishing-Well; or, "Be Content with such Things as ye Have."

By LUCY TAYLOR. 2s.

Nearly in Port; or, Phoebe Mostyn's Life-Story.

By Mrs. COOPER. 2s.

Dot-and-go-one.

By M. BLANCHE HAYWARD. 2s.

Higher Up.

By NELLIE HELLIS. 2s.

A New Broom.

By ELLEN LOUISA DAVIS. 2s.

The Sale of Callowfields.

By Mrs. PROSSER. 2s.

The Secret Room.

By Miss POCKLINGTON. 2s.

THE RELIGIOUS TRACT SOCIETY, 56 Paternoster Row, London, E.C.

